

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Robert Kunimura

"So, in a way, what I was thinking, our salvation in the plantation was that we could have a union. Because it was not a matter of wages and working conditions, but pride. Before, when you meet your relative or your friend from Honolulu, he say, 'Where you work?' He ask us, 'Where you working?' We hate to tell them that we working plantation. Because when you say you working for the plantation, you were pitied. That it was synonymous with one dollar a day and that you were living in one old plantation shack. So, union, to me, union is pride. . . ."

The sixth of eleven children, Robert Kunimura was born February 14, 1915 in Kōloa. The son of immigrants from Yamaguchi-ken, Japan, Robert grew up in Kōloa's New Mill Camp. He attended Kōloa School and graduated from Kaua'i High School in 1933.

After graduation, Robert worked as a mill employee. He quit in 1935 after a disagreement with a supervisor. He then began working for the Kaua'i County Works Progress Administration.

In 1938, he returned to Kōloa Plantation and was involved in union-organizing activities. He was active in signing up Kōloa workers for ILWU membership, and played a key role in the union's organization after World War II and in the union's first territory-wide sugar strike in 1946.

Following the strike, Robert, in 1947, became president of the Kaua'i Local of the ILWU. He remained at that post until 1950, when the Locals consolidated into one territory-wide Local. Bob then became an ILWU business agent.

Bob returned to plantation work in 1952, remaining there until his retirement in 1974.

He still lives in Kōloa with his wife, Sue Watanabe Kunimura. They raised five children.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Robert Kunimura (RK)

November 5, 1987

Kōloa, Kaua'i

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Kunimura on November 5, 1987, in Kōloa. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, let's start. First of all, Bob, tell me when and where you were born.

RK: I was born February 14 in this Kōloa town by the old mill.

WN: February 14. What year?

RK: Nineteen fifteen, yeah.

WN: So, you were born by the old mill?

RK: Old mill. That's the one. You see where the--there's a plaque, huh, over there.

WN: Across [the street] from [the present-day] Sueoka [Store]?

RK: That's the one. Uh huh. Yeah. That's the old mill. And . . .

WN: Was the old mill there at the time?

RK: Yeah. That old mill was still functioning. Then they built the new mill. That's about mile and a half, mile away from the old mill. Somewhere around 1918 or 19--I can't remember [1913]. But, then, my parents had to move to the new mill, yeah.

WN: I see.

RK: Which is the present mill. Yeah.

WN: What was your father doing?

RK: Well, he [Sadajiro Kunimura] was working in the mill, maintenance man in the mill.

WN: And your mother?

RK: My mother [Katsu Fukushima Kunimura] was a housewife. She used to do lot of laundry and housecleaning for, I still remember the principal of Kōloa School. . . . And some other people, yeah. Once a week, housecleaning.

WN: Was your father any kind of foreman or anything?

RK: Yeah, he was. Later on, he was a foreman for the mill out there. But like now, wives had to, you can say, look for employment because hardly any employment for women in those days. So they had to supplement their income by doing washing or housecleaning work, for supervisors over there.

WN: So you don't remember the house by the old mill?

RK: No.

WN: Okay.

RK: Because I'm sure I must have been about three years or four years old when we moved from the old mill to the new mill. So I don't remember nothing. [RK's family must have continued to live near the old mill until around 1918, despite the fact that the new mill was built in 1913.]

WN: What was your house like in the new mill side?

RK: Well, if I recall, during that period, we go to school six years old already. Not like today, five years, right? Kindergarten, five. I think we started school six years old, and we had to walk one mile distance, six days a week. Five days, public school; Saturdays, Japanese[-language] school. Rain or shine, right? We had to walk. And hardly anybody pick us up because there were hardly any cars on the road to begin with. I'm talking about period from 1921, '22, to about 1929, when I graduated from this Kōloa School. So, eight years, walk. Barefooted. Our mother used to pack us lunch, which will be whatever, and, those days, no wax paper, right?

WN: Yeah.

RK: So that the rice was wrapped in the newspaper, the Japanese newspaper. So, the hot rice, when it gets cold, when you want to take out the rice ball, all the newspaper [sticks to the rice ball].

WN: The ink?

RK: Well, we used to, yeah, eat that. Until one day one teacher saw that and made us aware of that because the ink was poisonous. I guess that's why we living long yet, because we had so much poison in us, and all that. (Laughs) Honest, yeah. You can't take--if you going take off all, you going get hardly any rice ball left.

(Laughter)

RK: Yeah. But during the holiday season when there were lot of apples and oranges, well, at least they kept the wrapping. Because there was no wax paper at that time, right?

WN: So besides rice ball, what did you take for lunch?

RK: Oh, well, it's understood already, right in the middle of the rice ball there was one ume, right? And hardly any meat because meat was a scarce item those days. Well, maybe the supervisor, he used to eat a lot of meat but not the workingman. And whatever meat our parents bought wasn't for frying. It was stew or cooked with something else, right there. That's why we used to do our own fishing, so we used to eat a lot of fish here. More so, let's see, like Ike [Okamura] guys living here, they were not close to the beach like we were. The beach is maybe two miles away from here [i.e., the interview is taking place at Ike Okamura's home]. But we were living one mile away from the beach, so. Oh, fertile fishing grounds, and oh, boy, we used to catch fish here.

WN: What kind fish?

RK: Oh, we used to catch rockfish, here. Because those days we don't have net. Rockfish and, oh, whatever the fish in season. If it was moi li'i season, oh, we used to catch plenty moi li'i, bring home for the parents. And no icebox those days, so the only way to preserve 'em is either you dry the fish or you salt the fish, you see. No refrigerator, so that's the way. So you going eat fish, you got to eat within the two days after you catch 'em, you know. But, still then, that was helping the family with food expense. Fish was not that easy to obtain [i.e., buy], too. You know, when your parents make dollar a day and if they had to pay thirty-five cents for a fish, just like half a day work only for the fish. But we used to bring 'em home, yeah. We went fishing to enjoy fishing, but more, to bring something back for the table. Every meal we get vegetable. But meat was, oh, just like impossible to get.

WN: Like a luxury, yeah?

RK: Oh, yes, it was a luxury. That's why we not steak-eaters. Because we weren't brought up eating those things. So today, if you give me a piece of steak, small piece, I eat so much that I don't care to eat more, right? But you give me plate of vegetable or let's say, like today. . . . In those days, see, when our parents, we raise our own chicken, so they kill chicken, and they make hekka. But, remember, when our family kill one chicken, the meat part go to hekka, and the rest go to soup for the next day or something. And so, whatever portion of chicken they put in the hekka, there's more vegetable in there than. . . . (Chuckles) But today, our kids today, they meat-eaters, right? They like the steak, they like the chicken, fried chicken, all that. They don't care for vegetables. You see, today, when we have hekka like that, I don't care to eat

the chicken. I rather go for the vegetable. The bamboo shoot, bean sprout, or green onion, you see. That's the difference today.

WN: How you got your vegetables?

RK: We raise our own, yeah. Because another thing that the plantation offered to the workers was that where your house was, you had a big yard. So you had enough room to raise vegetables, and chicken or duck or whatever you wanted, in the back. And in the front, you can raise vegetables because the pretty good-sized lot they used to have.

WN: How many square feet about?

RK: Well, I would say, well, 8[,000] to 10,000 square feet, yeah, of lot per home, so. The water was free, right? Yeah, water was free.

WN: Everybody in the camp had that size lot?

RK: Yeah, it's everybody, uh huh, yeah. So the first time I went to Honolulu was 1934 or '35, my first visit to Honolulu. And those days, you had to catch the interisland steamer, the overnight trip to Honolulu. And the morning when I got up and I saw all the lights, I was just horrified. "What's going on with all the lights?" On Kaua'i you don't see no lights, right? That is way up outside of Honolulu Harbor approaching into Honolulu, on the hillside, yeah. So, let's say, Tantalus and all that. You know, the lights over there. Of course, today, it's maybe hundred times more light than in those days. This is back in 1935. Yet, we didn't see light like that [before], you know. And the family that we were staying with, kind of relative to my friend, in Pawa'a. That would be close to where Holiday Mart would be or Pagoda Hotel, you know, around there, yeah. Chee, how come this kind people--no yard. Every house, side by side, all the homes over there. So, the country living was little different. You had more space. All the land available, anyway, right here. Pretty good-sized lot.

WN: How big was your house? How many bedrooms?

RK: Three bedrooms, yeah.

WN: For how many kids?

RK: Well---see, ours was a small family because although our family had eleven children, about three was sent back to Japan, and about two died during that Spanish influenza in 1919. I still remember, I was in the hospital.

WN: Yeah?

RK: Yeah. The hospital right over here. Well, you know, people were dying left and right, you know. Luckily, I survived. I survived that flu here.

WN: You were about . . .

RK: Four or five years old. I still remember that. I was in the hospital, yeah.

WN: But two of your brothers . . .

RK: I'm sure two of my sisters or something died, yeah. So, the plantation homes over here pretty good size. All had--we called that veranda. Today, you call that sun porch or something, right?

WN: Yeah, yeah. Lanai or something.

RK: Yeah. Lanai or something. So, pretty wide, too, which was kind of wasted room. Because you can sleep outside there. It's not that close. But lot of mosquitoes. But today, the modern homes all get the sun porch around here.

WN: So you folks' house, was it any better or nicer than anybody else's in the neighborhood, or they're all the same?

RK: Same architectural design, same material, same size lot, yeah. And I'm sure, I think the same kind of whitewash. No paint. They used to whitewash, you know.

WN: Yeah. People that lived over there, were they all mill workers?

RK: Yes, because the camp, see, like any other plantation, they segregated the workers by their race, okay? So, where I was brought up was Japanese Camp. So practically all Japanese live in that camp and they were mill workers because of the proximity from the camp to the mill. And, of course, there were field workers, too. Construction workers. But, was all Japanese people in that camp. The plantation had a strict control about that. If you were of other racial groups, if you wanted to move into the Japanese Camp, they wouldn't allow you to come in here. Of course, later on, kind of changed, you see. The plantation changed a little. So, we had all kinds of nationality, racial group, in this Japanese Camp here.

WN: So when did you notice other nationalities coming into your camp?

RK: Oh, about 1930s. They started to be more flexible about that. Because when you take the Filipino Camp, and they were the most numerous workers on the plantation, the homes where the Filipino Camp was, more on the single-men quarters, bull pen way. Because very few Filipinos were married. They were more single men here. Whereas, the other less racial group were all more married, family, you see. So the Filipino Camp, if they make one long house, it's about twenty rooms and one common kitchen for that group of workers. But then, when the Filipino married couple, they couldn't put 'em into the single. So they used to, if there were homes available, they used to put [married] Filipinos into the Japanese Camp.

But, by that time, our parents were little more assimilated with the other racial groups already. The prejudice wasn't that strong in the '30s already. There were more, what do you call--Japanese say akirameru already, you know. Take it for granted already that there shouldn't be any discrimination. Because, after all, who created all this division? It's the plantation owners. Divide and conquer. No argument, yeah. So, even today, Kōloa, we still say, "Eh, Spanish Camp." But there's no Spanish living there. (Laughs) But that's a name that was assigned to that particular area. That was the Spanish Camp, the Filipino Camp, and, can you believe, we say, "Eh, by the old Korean Camp." Of course, there's no camp there today, all new subdivision, but that's because the Koreans used to be put into that area. And the Portuguese in this camp, yeah. Japanese, yeah.

WN: So you said "divide and conquer," try go explain that.

RK: Well, little did I realize what was the purpose of this plantation segregating the living areas by race. Well, I wouldn't say on the working place because they couldn't put Japanese all in the factory [i.e., mill], right? Or, they couldn't say, "Let the Japanese go work in the cutting and the loading of the cane." Because they came here earlier, so they were more old, right? That was for the Filipino immigrant workers because they were beginning, young, new workers. When you do that kind of a work, good if you last five years. So straining is that work, see.

Well, so, as far as living area, while they [plantation management] strictly had the control, Japanese live among themselves. Filipinos live alone, Portuguese. . . . The reason is, I'm sure, they didn't want the workers to, what'd you call, live in harmony. They wanted the workers to always have some suspicion [for each other]. That's the way I could see, you know, because there were lot of unions that came up in the plantation, but strictly along racial line. So when the Filipino strike, the Japanese are working. And when the Japanese are striking, the Filipinos go work. Oh, well, I mention it because they were the two predominant groups in the [plantation]. Numerically, you see. They [management] didn't want the workers to band together. Every union or strike along that line, racial line, got smashed, until the advent of the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union], which [in 1945] organized the workers in one unit, regardless of race, color, or your national origin. But by that time, there was too much of the language difficulty. Because more or less, everybody was speaking English, you see.

WN: So the plantation segregated all the races so that they wouldn't get together and, you know, form a union?

RK: Exactly, exactly, yeah.

WN: About 1920, there was a Japanese strike, yeah? Do you remember that?

RK: No, I don't remember that, no. That's too . . .

WN: You know if your father was involved in it?

RK: No, I don't know. I can't remember. But I know the Filipino strike, because that was in 1926 or something.

WN: [Nineteen-]twenty-four.

RK: Twenty-four, yeah. Well, I was nine years old and I heard they shot a lot of these strikers in Hanapepe [sixteen strikers and four policemen were killed]. I still recall that, yeah. And the funny thing, as far as I'm concerned, I can recall, about five, six years old, anything that happened. About back to five or six years old, I can recall. Beyond that, pretty hard memory.

WN: Boy, that's hard, huh, yeah? I mean, not too many people remember before five . . .

RK: What about you, though?

WN: Oh, I remember [from] five [years old], I think.

RK: Five. About that, right? But three, four, no, no, pretty hard.

WN: Yeah, yeah. So . . .

RK: Is that normal? No, no, I just wanted to find out (chuckles) if that was normal.

WN: Sure, yeah. (Laughs) That's normal, you normal. (Laughs) You know, what, you said you lived by the mill.

RK: Right.

WN: But there was a New Mill Camp. And there was a Japanese Camp. Was that the same camp or was that different camp?

RK: No. When they call that area New Mill, it's because they moved--they had the old mill and they moved the operation. Constructed a new mill about one mile away. And so, naturally, whatever mail come to you is [addressed to] Kōloa New Mill, see. Because they had a New Mill in 'Ele'ele, too. No doubt that they had the old mill and they built a new mill, so there's not only one New Mill. And when they say, "Oh, the New Mill Japanese Camp," or "New Mill Filipino Camp," they knew where it was.

WN: So was there a difference between New Mill Camp and Japanese Camp?

RK: No. No difference. It was only that, if you wanted to locate somebody that camped down the New Mill, say, "Go down to the Japanese Camp. New Mill Japanese Camp." That's all, yeah.

WN: But there was a Japanese Camp further up, right, [behind] where First Hawaiian Bank is now? That was a Japanese Camp down there?

RK: Right, right, right, uh huh.

WN: So there's a distinction then between . . .

RK: Yeah, because not all the workers moved down to the new mill, yeah. Because lot of the field workers were still housed in this Kōloa Japanese Camp.

WN: Oh. That's the one [behind] where the [First Hawaiian] Bank is [today].

RK: That's right, yeah. That used to be a big Japanese Camp over there.

WN: And that was where they had [the original] Sueoka Store . . .

RK: No. Well, Sueoka Store was actually between the border of the Japanese Camp, Kōloa Japanese Camp, and the start of the Filipino, Kōloa Filipino Camp, here. That's the way it was.

WN: I see. I see. Were there stores down at New Mill Camp?

RK: There was a plantation branch store [a branch of the Kōloa Plantation Store], to cater to the people of that area. See, in those days, all the stores used to sell out, well . . .

WN: Chūmon-tori?

RK: Chūmon-tori or solicitor, something like that, and they'd come and take your order, okay? So they come to your house and what you want, half bag rice, half-a-gallon shoyu. And they come on Monday and they said, "We'll deliver on Wednesday." That's the way business was. . . . But you could go to the store and buy whatever you wanted. So, all the stores used to do that.

WN: Was the branch store smaller than the main Kōloa [Plantation Store]?

RK: Oh, yeah. Much, much smaller. Not even one-fifth the size of the main store. But, you see, Kōloa, they had only one branch store in the New Mill. But if you take like McBryde Sugar Company, they had branch stores from Kukui'ula, Lāwa'i--my goodness, they had about six, seven branch stores. Because the camps were scattered from Kukui'ula to way over 'Ele'ele. Over here [Kōloa], more or less, gee, people were housed--the workers were housed more concentrated area, instead of small [scattered camps], yeah. That way, transportation for the workers much easier.

WN: Okay. (Pause)

RK: And, you want to know more about the plantation system merchandising?

WN: Sure.

RK: Yeah, you just--they give credit [at the store owned and operated by the plantation]. Whatever you order came out of your paycheck. Let's say you bought fifteen dollar worth, [you pay] no cash. You earn twenty-five bucks for that month. So you owe them fifteen dollars. They [i.e., plantation] deduct that out of your paycheck. Not paycheck, payroll. (Laughs) 'Cause all, all cash, yeah?

WN: So they had to deduct, but you couldn't pay them?

RK: No, no way. 'Cause, in order to get credit from the plantation store, I think that they didn't require you to sign a withdrawal statement. I think they just took it upon themselves that whatever you owe them, they just deduct 'em out of you. So a lot of the workers, payday, they get nothing in their paycheck, huh. (Chuckles) Yeah.

WN: Did people run away?

RK: My goodness, yeah. But---see, the plantation stores could survive that because they had the payroll deduction planned. But what about the independent [i.e., non-plantation-run] stores, on the outside? If the guy didn't receive anything in his pay envelope, how he's going to pay the outside stores, you see.

WN: So the outside stores had it rough, huh?

RK: Oh, yeah. Rough time. Rough time. So, twice a week the interisland steamer used to come into Nawiliwili. And, you see the outside merchants all by the. . . . See, the steamer used to leave 10:00 [p.m.] So about 9:00, the passengers start boarding the steamer to go to Honolulu. The merchants right by the gangplank, watching. Then if they see you, they know you, right? They know you owe the--oh, they used to get the police and get the guy detained, or he pay.

WN: What stores used to do that?

RK: Oh, all the stores, the independent stores. Most all run by Japanese. You know, the small merchants. Oh, that used to be common practice. The store merchants down Nawiliwili. Saturday night and Wednesday night, Tuesday night, or whatever. The plantation didn't worry because they had the first whack at the payrolls. Not only that, but when a worker wasn't showing up to work, the office notified the store manager. Say, "Don't extend credit to--" well, usually not the name those days--"Bango 1122," or something. (Laughs) Yeah. They didn't go even by name those days. They had to go by bango. But I'm talking about more the single Filipino workers. Because they could move easier [to another plantation], right? They single. They want to work Waipahu Plantation, well, what the hell, they just put all what they got in one pillowcase and they move to the next island, right? That's how

they used to go. And no, cannot trace the workers because no social security number, those days. (Chuckles) Right?

WN: Yeah, that's right. So mostly the Filipinos that were leaving?

RK: Yeah. Because there were more single kind, yeah. Maybe some guy, he go gamble, lose all his money, eh. He can't pay his debt. What the hell, he skipped this island. Fly the coop and go someplace else.

(Laughter)

RK: But the married ones cannot do that, right? How can they move, yeah?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Maybe the middle of the night they skip town. Nobody know where they went. (Laughs) That's the way.

WN: What did the plantation provide . . .

RK: Oh, perquisites?

WN: Perquisites.

RK: Okay. Perquisites, to begin with, house, okay? Medical. So every plantation had their own hospital. Fuel. Fuel was, if you had kerosene stove, kerosene. Five-gallon [can], single; ten-gallon [can], married, okay?

WN: You had to buy your own stove?

RK: Yeah. You had to buy your own stove. But even stove, the plantation will--let's say you're a new worker and you come over here--the plantation used to keep in stock lot of stoves and they used to sell to you for not too inflated price. Very reasonable price. And they used to deduct that out of your paycheck, too. And if you didn't have kerosene stove, because lot of people were still cooking outside, you cut the old kerosene can, square can, and cooked rice and everything outdoors.

WN: Oh, built fire underneath?

RK: Yeah, yeah. So they give you firewood. A cord of firewood.

WN: How much is one cord?

RK: One cord is, if I'm not mistaken, it's four feet. See the pile, when they stack 'em, it got to be four feet high and eight feet long, I think. That's a cord.

WN: About how heavy was that, do you think?

RK: Well, depend on the wood, now. You don't have kiawe here, see. Kiawe is more plentiful Kekaha side. So, over here, they give you whatever is available. Lot of times, that Java plum. See, they don't go by weight, they go by the dimension. I think it was four by eight feet. That's a cord.

And water. But, well, water . . .

WN: How did they deliver water to you folks? How did they get water . . .

RK: Oh, was all piped.

WN: Water was piped by then?

RK: Yeah. Uh huh. Water was piped. Water was no problem because, anyway, if they didn't have water they couldn't sell [i.e., operate] the plantation, anyway, right? So there was plentiful of water. Although when big storm, like last night, the drinking water used to get discolored. Because the pipeline was not way up in the mountains. You know, by the watershed. So the water, the further your pipeline is, you get cleaner water, see. This discoloration takes place because when the water run down, it'll gather dirt, erosion, right here. That's why the water get more discolored.

WN: Your water came from Waitā [Reservoir]?

RK: No. Waitā was not part of our water. Waitā was strictly for irrigation. [Drinking water] came from way up. But I'm sure they make sure that we had good water because the bosses themselves had to drink water, right? (WN laughs.) So (chuckles) how can they give us lousy water and we get all stomachache. Nobody go work next day. So the water was good water. Free water. Use what you want. That was good. And I guess the other perquisite, nothing I can think of. Nothing I can think of.

WN: What about the toilet facility?

RK: Oh, toilet facility, depending on where you were living, see. Not flush toilet, no, no way. Some places, it's all outhouse. Without flush, how can you make it indoors, right? Kōloa Japanese Camp was about the worse in the whole Hawaiian island. Box [i.e., an outhouse in which waste was collected in a box]. See, [in Kōloa, the terrain is] rocky, so that the plantation don't want to dig any cesspool. Because they [would have] had to dynamite. But, actually, today, that's the best kind [terrain] for cesspool. 'Cause there's lot of lava tubes [underneath] there. You know where I live, too, my goodness, you can run the drain water all night because there's lot of holes, lava tubes under there, you see. But to the plantation, because it was rocky, all box. Maybe once a month they come collect the box. That was terrible. Don't mention toilet. Oh, my goodness, that was the worse.

WN: What about transportation? Plantation supply transportation at all?

RK: To work?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah. The locomotive. At least, you have to get up one hour before working time if you want to catch the locomotive because they take you to work. To and from by locomotive. Those days, hardly any trucks yet, so, naturally, no labor truck. Not like today. Today, they don't even furnish a labor truck. Every worker goes with his own car.

WN: When you were growing up, what kind of things did you do to have good fun, as a kid?

RK: Oh, I would say, summer vacation. Summer vacation is the time when the weather is nice, mangoes and guavas in season, mountain apple in season. We had plenty to eat as far as those things concerned. Then fishing, and a little bit of hunting with BB gun because we were too young for shotgun. 'Cause lot of game those days. Oh, pheasants, doves, lot of game. But we didn't waste 'em. What we shot we ate 'em. Nothing wasted, yeah.

WN: Where did you go hunting?

RK: Oh, in the plantation. See, the plantation, more so like Kōloa Plantation fields, when there's too much rock, they don't plant cane. So, naturally, those area, maybe acres and acres of land area, is all in guava and mango, and all wild because they can't plant cane. So they have cattle grazing in that pasture. That's good habitat for wild animals. Pheasants, doves, yeah, plentiful. Of course, today, most of those areas is subdivision. But in the olden days, because the camps were already established, nobody could buy one lot and build his own house. Impossible. Why you have to do that? You work for this free house, right?

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: Okay, hunting, now what else?

RK: Fishing.

WN: Fishing?

RK: Yeah. See, while the school was in session, the only time we can go fishing was Saturday night. Friday night we could not go because we had to attend Japanese-language school Saturday. So Saturday night is the only time. The reason is, we had to camp overnight down the

beach. And there is some cave there, shelter we can sleep in at night. Make a small bonfire, we cook our own. And, you know, while you get your fire on, no mosquitoes come around, so. Then we go on the 'āpapa, that's reef, to go and try catch that small kind jumping jack [fish], crab. That was for the bait. On Sunday, when daybreak, we had to go and hook all these rockfish. And we had to get bait because there was no such thing as you could go to the store and buy one pound of ika or shrimp. There was no bait available. You had to go and catch your--look for your own bait, see. That's why all these places, these 'āpapas, the name that we had was, "First Catch Bait, Second Catch Bait, Last Catch Bait." Because that's the place [where we would go], at night with the torch [to catch bait]. Kerosene was free, right? You make small kerosene torch and we used to go and catch these small jumping jack--well, small, any kind of small kind fish.

WN: Crab or fish?

RK: No. Fish. And then on the dry part of the 'āpapa, I don't know what kind crab they call that, but we used to call 'em 'a'ama crab.

WN: 'A'ama?

RK: Yeah. That's about the best bait. So we get enough of the bait. Then next day, in the morning, we start going with our pole and hooking the fish, yeah.

WN: Hmm. What beach did you folks go to?

RK: Oh, what we call now, "Shipwreck." That was good. The choicest beach was Māhā'ulepū Beach.

WN: Uh huh.

RK: But that was strictly for the plantation manager. Anybody caught fishing there, well, we don't know what would happen to our parents. So we were afraid to enter that beach. Plantation manager. Oh no, we sneaked in. We sneaked in because the manager, he had other things to do, I guess. He didn't patrol the beach that often. So we used to sneak in, yeah. But beautiful beach there. Māhā'ulepū Beach.

WN: But Shipwreck, anybody could go?

RK: Yeah. Shipwreck was open for anybody. But, at that time, we were not old enough to master the net throwing, you know, throw net. Because after all, if you want to make one throw net, it cost you money because you had to buy needle and thread to make the net. But fish was so plentiful that even with the pole, line and pole, oh, we used to bring enough fish home for our family to eat, about three days' [supply of] fish. So our parents used to, certain fish, they used to make chiri, you know, [a] kind [of] soup.

WN: Chiri, yeah.

RK: Chiri and, of course, more, they had to salt it to preserve 'em, okay. And the parents used to be so happy because here we bringing home a big source of protein. 'Cause, see, my parents came from Yamaguchi-ken. They fish-eaters. Where they come from, lot of fish, yeah. So whenever we come home, ho, my mother used to praise us up, you know. Dairyō. You know what that means?

WN: Dairyō?

RK: Yeah.

WN: No.

RK: That means big, big haul, catch. I still remember. She praising us up, yeah. But we appreciate because we thought that we are helping the family put some food on the table. Plus, we were happy eating that fish, too, so. That's better than vegetable. Green onion or eggplant . . .

WN: What kind vegetables did you folks have in your yard?

RK: Oh, see, at that time we used to get the--the public school used to teach gardening. So they had a big, maybe one-acre, two-acre plot of land. Start of the semester, everybody is assigned one maybe four-feet-by-eight-feet-long bed. Each student were assigned and it's up to you what you wanted to plant. So, planted beans, some planted radish. Oh, radish was the best because in twenty-five days, you could harvest your radish, right? And the worse vegetable to plant was carrots 'cause took so long for the carrots to mature. And beets. So our parents--see, what we couldn't sell [at school], we used to take home. And so they learn more and more about vegetables other than what they found in Japan. Like that kind radish, you know that red radish, yeah? So, later on, what we plant in our home garden was lot of the vegetables that our parents got used to and liked. Like beets, the red beets. Oh, they like so we plant 'em at home. But the common vegetable that we planted in our home garden was, to start with, nasubi, eggplant, you know. Japanese have to get eggplant. Green onions and pole beans. Of course, the pole beans had no disease, hardly any disease those days. You could get two crop. One crop, [and] if you don't pull the plant, they used to get another growth. You could get another crop from that same beans. Of course, not as plentiful like the first pickings, you see. But, today, you don't even get half a crop and gone already. Too much disease today. And, naturally, daikon, every family, they have to get daikon. And then, see, our parents learned about spinach. So, spinach, well, so easy to grow. You know that common spinach, the one that grow out here. Of course, if you eat the can spinach, you don't like it, but you know the fresh spinach? Parboil, that's good eating. Good eating. So--that's about all.

WN: Besides chicken, did you folks raise any other animal?

RK: Oh yeah. Maybe, yeah, duck.

WN: Oh, yeah?

RK: Oh, of course, that's later on, though. See, if you go to the Puerto Rican [i.e., Spanish] or Portuguese Camp, they get [ducks]; Filipino Camp, they plant lot of banana. The Japanese don't know what is banana, right? I'm talking about when we were young, see. So, ho, banana taste good. So we used to plant our own, you know. And our parents don't know what is banana. More Chinese banana, the short one. See Japanese, they had a strong superstition. They didn't want to plant any kind of a tree in their yard. Some, they don't like anything that's from the mountain. They don't want to plant in their yard.

WN: How come?

RK: I don't know. That's a superstition.

WN: Oh, yeah?

RK: Yeah. Very strong superstition. So, they don't plant no ti leaf in their yard. And ti leaf is such a versatile plant for cooking and all that. And mountain apple. They don't want to plant mountain apple in the yard. Even mango, they don't want to plant. And you couldn't do anything if the parents don't want the plant, right? They didn't know corn. In fact, the superstition was that don't plant corn because once you plant corn and you got it, nothing else will grow. But . . .

WN: Did other people plant corn?

RK: When you go to the Filipino Camp, oh, all of them plant corn. Of course, not sweet corn like today. But still yet, when you eat 'em young, corn used to taste good. But we couldn't plant corn in our garden because our parents wouldn't allow us to plant corn. Sure if you keep on planting over and over, corn, that's no good. But once a year one crop, corn, there's nothing harmed. So corn, oh, we used to like corn.

WN: So you folks never have any fruits in your yard, then?

RK: Well, no, later on, we planted. We planted because, naturally, more and more people plant so they break down the superstition.

WN: So besides hunting and fishing, did you folks go, like, to town a lot, Kōloa town?

RK: Well, we go every day. Public school, [and afterwards] we go to Japanese[-language] school.

WN: Which was by the [Kōloa] Hongwanji?

RK: Yeah. Right, right there. So we had to pass through here. Every day, so the town was nothing much. Not like today. (Chuckles) Nothing much. In fact, we were the masters of shoplifting. (Laughs) When the proprietor saw us, boy, they told us to get out. (Laughs) Well, we were hungry after school. So when the public school closes about one-thirty to two o'clock, then we had to go to Japanese[-language] school. But the people--the children who live around here [near Kōloa town], they can go home and take a bite, cracker or something. But the ones living down [near] the mill, how can they go home? Right? Big difference, you know.

Lunch was five cents. School lunch. They used to give you a token, brass token. Kōloa School, five cents. Got to make sure you no lose 'em because it was just as big as a dollar, silver dollar. Yeah, big.

WN: What about movies?

RK: Those days they had a strong curfew law. And, oh, boy, you had to be with somebody twenty-one years or older accompany you. Otherwise they used to arrest you. So, maybe once a week, the theater down there, ten cents. You see Hoot Gibson or Tom Mix, cowboy picture, right? That was all silent picture. So the talkie came in about 1932, '33, the first talkie.

WN: Did they ever go down to New Mill Camp to show movies?

RK: Yes. They used to show--they bought one old generator. And the generator outside was making more noise than the benshi inside.

WN: Oh, the narrator?

RK: Yeah, the narrator, yeah. Then if the generator give trouble, good night, there's no movie. They refund your money right there. But more Japanese movies, yeah.

WN: Japanese movies?

RK: Japanese movies, yeah.

WN: Where did they have it in the camp?

RK: They pick one--in a yard. In a yard because there was no social hall. Where we lived, there was no social hall. But like certain plantations, they had social hall in every camp so they could show 'em right in the social hall. But, our place we didn't have any social hall. So they put the canvas around that yard. But that's easy to crawl under, huh? Soon as the movie start, you don't have to pay, you crawl under, right?

WN: Oh, they, what, they pitch tent or something? They pitch one tent?

RK: Yeah. Let's say, now, you want to cover this area, right, they going show the movie there. They put poles and they put tent like this, you see. The canvas material. So you just lift 'em up, you crawl under. But our parents paid, yeah. Our parents paid to go in and see it. And see how ignorant we were. They used to show Ku Klux Klan movies. KKK. And we were so ignorant, naive. We thought that the KKK were the good guys. And that the Blacks were the no-good guys. So when we play, say on our hat or our shirt, everybody put "KKK," honest. We didn't know any better, right? Then, yet, the plantation bosses were the KKK's, right? Actually, right?

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

RK: Our parents could not help us with English, public school homework, see. Of course, they didn't know English. Well, if you had a family with older sister or older brother, they might be of help. But my family, my sister and I, my older sister, not much difference the age, yeah, so. Oh, we struggle, right? We didn't know what was the meaning of this word or. . . . But when it come to mathematics, not too much problem. If you knew little about mathematics you could catch on. But let's say, now, let's say, take the word "handicap," okay? We thought that was "hundred cap." Okay? So, I say, "I race you, Warren."

So you say, "Yeah, but you got to give me hundred cap."

But we don't know what the hell that means, see. And they say, "No, I don't want hundred, I like two hundred cap." (WN laughs.) I mean, nobody to teach us, right? Oh, that's true, you know. That's what we thought, you see. Not hundred, really, you give me two hundred cap. Well, what is two hundred cap? Nobody knows, yeah, right? Because we didn't know what was "handicap." We thought was "hundred cap." So we were [a] little disadvantaged. Of course, the parents couldn't help us.

WN: You spoke Japanese at home?

RK: Yeah, there's no other way, right? No other way.

WN: And you still had to go Japanese[-language] school?

RK: Yeah, right, right. We had to go Japanese[-language] school. But, well, I don't know how the others felt, but I rebelled because I was thinking that the Japanese[-language] schoolteacher was too autocratic. In public school, at least the teacher respected you, right? Respected the freedom of speech and equality and all that. But the Japanese[-language] school, if the teacher said black is white, that's what is, right? But most of all, we didn't have the professional schoolteacher. In Japanese[-language] school, we had the bon-san.

WN: Priest?

RK: The [Buddhist] priest. So, one year, the Hongwanji priest, minister, is the principal. Following year, the Jōdo Mission. And when it came to disciplining the students, if your parents were from the Jōdo Mission [for example], that minister is to be the one to spank you or whatever form of discipline they wielded, see. And they were vicious, yeah. They were vicious. The first black eye I got was from my schoolteacher.

WN: Japanese[-language] schoolteacher?

RK: Japanese[-language] schoolteacher, uh huh.

WN: How did that happen?

RK: Well, because, see, two to a school desk, right? So, my friend and I were talking. We weren't paying attention to the teacher. So the teacher, from my friend's side, he shoved my friend, and his head he bang into my eye. So, oh, my eye, so I ran off and I didn't go back to school. And I went home. I told my father. He asked me how I got that. I said that [Koremitsu] Muraoka-sensei, you know the one that you [interviewed]. . . . And I get scolding. See, we thought my parents were trying to learn what happened. I'm already wrong because the teacher is always right. What you going do? And my argument is, why we get mistreated when we have to pay [tuition]? In public school we don't pay. We didn't know about taxation and all that, right? Because we had to pay two dollar half or dollar half, huh, per student [for Japanese-language school].

So then one day--I'm the smallest in the class. Before the school starts, we all got to face. . . . I'm the first [in line], so I don't have to do this [i.e., extend your two arms in front of you]. But everybody else have to do this, one--yeah, I don't know what you call it, one space back, huh?

WN: Oh, line up and touch the student in front of you [with arms extended]?

RK: Yeah, yeah. So the line wouldn't be . . .

WN: Crooked.

RK: So, this day, my friend was lined up in front of me. So, I have a habit, I don't do this because I'm the smallest, so--the first guy [in line] don't do this [i.e., extend your two arms in front of you], see. Then this principal, he's from the Hongwanji Mission. We [parents] were Jōdo, okay? So he tell me, "Put!" Japanese, put my hand up. I knew already because he get one stick. The stick he uses, the kind chair, oak stick, you know. You know the kind old-fashioned chair, they get the kind stick chairs. That's hard. He tell me put my hand up. I knew that he was going give me one whack over here, I knew. So I ran out from the line, and "You can go to hell," I told him, "You ain't gonna. . . ." So I quit. Voluntarily I quit this school.

WN: You said 'em in Japanese 'or in English?

RK: Oh, English. I can't use that kind word fluently in Japanese. My kid brother next to me. . . . I wait till the day pau, they through with their school, then I walk home with them. So when we reach home, our parents don't know anything, you see. But one week later, I question my kid brother. "You get any letter?" I know the teacher gonna send letter through my kid brother to the parents, huh.

He said, "Yeah," you know.

"Give me that letter." I take that letter, I rip 'em up. So nothing happened. To my parents, I'm still going school. One day the teacher, that one you questioned [i.e., interviewed], Muraoka-sensei, he came to my house. I'm not going to school, see. I cannot intercept the teacher, right? (Chuckles) He came to report to my parents.

So my father said, "Why you not going school?"

So I told 'em, I said, "You think I want to get licking from that bloody bozu? Your eye (chuckles)." (WN laughs.)

But my father said, "You go back school."

So in front of this Muraoka-sensei, I said, "All right, I go back. Promise he no going lick me. Otherwise, I not going back."

So, that Muraoka-sensei promised me, okay, he not going hit.

WN: And he never hit you?

RK: No. He never hit me. But, don't worry, I got even with that bon-san. He had a son way younger than us. Boy, when we catch that--because we have to pass through the temple ground on the way home.

WN: This is the bon-san, not the teacher?

RK: No. The bon-san is the teacher, too.

WN: But this is not Muraoka, though?

RK: No. Muraoka-sensei was strictly a teacher. He has nothing to do with the temple, see.

WN: Oh, I see.

RK: But this bon-san, the one that minister, he had a son, small boy, kid, son. Oh, we go we slap his head. Kick 'em in the rear. We used to lick the hell out of the son. That's how we used to take revenge. See, that bon-san was so big that he hit one of the kids.

Cut the cartilage. That boy is still crippled today.

WN: Oh, yeah?

RK: Yeah. You know what is da kine, not barbed wire, but da kine fence wire?

WN: Hmm.

RK: He used to hit [with] that, you know. But my parents, my father was so mad that I heard my father say they shoot that bon-san, because my father don't belong to the Hongwanji. My father was this side [i.e., RK's father belonged to the Jōdo sect]. But he [i.e., priest] was a mean son of a gun, yeah.

WN: Your father was Jōdo?

RK: Jōdo, yeah.

WN: And what, the Jōdo bon-san was not as strict?

RK: No, he was not as big like the other guy, see.

WN: Oh.

RK: The other guy, I think he know jujitsu, I think. Well, we small. You down on the floor. That's the way he was, you got to watch. So that the Jōdo-shū bon-san wanted to do that to me, but I knew. I knew he was going try do that so I brace my leg hard. He couldn't knock me down, you know. Oh, boy, he got mad. He gave me more whacking with the stick. Because he couldn't throw me to the ground.

WN: So Japanese[-language] school you went every day plus Saturday?

RK: One hour.

WN: One hour after school?

RK: Yeah. And Saturday, half a day.

WN: That's tough.

RK: Tough. Tough is right. Okay for the kids around here. But we got to walk another extra mile. But Saturdays, we thought good day. Can go fishing, yeah. Go take mango or do something, right? Well, we had to go Japanese[-language] school first.

WN: You said English [i.e., public] school was a lot more lenient?

RK: Well, yes. More democracy in the English school. I would say that, yeah.

WN: What about your father, was he a strict man?

RK: Yes, strict in a certain way, he was strict, yeah. But still then, we get discipline from the teacher. We were wrong. I guess, that's the way they are in Japan. I don't know, right? But, what I'm just bringing out to you is that, I'm the first generation now, okay? Right?

WN: First generation born here?

RK: Yeah, born here, right. And I'm talking about I was only maybe ten years old. And we used to rebel already this Japanese custom and all that. No fault of ours. Maybe it was because of why our parents came in [to Hawai'i], you see. So, I heard my father say countless times, "When you grow up, you got to marry one Japanese girl."

So I used to tell him, "If I marry another nationality, that's not my fault. Why you came Hawai'i? If you was still in Yamaguchi-ken, no choice, you got to marry one Japanese girl."

And then he used to scold, say, "Baka." But I used to tell him off. I told him the truth. But maybe not every nisei my age had that feeling, you see. I already was rebelling inside me, the system.

WN: So you were more rebellious than most of your friends?

RK: Oh, yeah, I was. Oh yeah, honest, you know.

WN: What about your brothers and sisters?

RK: Well, you see, no, no, no, no. I was the only one in the family. Nobody taught me, but that's the way I felt, you see. Then more so when I went to high school and found out about the Bill of Rights and the Constitution of the United States, all men are created equal and freedom of speech, and all that. But, how come in the shop, if your foreman or if the boss told you that black is white, you got to say, "Yes, black is white"? I was thinking, "Hey, doesn't make sense."

WN: What about . . .

RK: That's why when the union came, oh, I volunteered. I said that's what I've been looking for all my life here. Let's go start this union. (Chuckles)

WN: What about at home, did you have chores to do at home?

RK: Well, I used to help my mother with the gardening. I dig the garden. Because my father didn't care to fool around the garden. You know, he came from a farming area, and well, you see, he was the oldest in the family. So, I guess the other siblings' chore was to take care garden all that, I think. But I was the oldest here and my father don't want to dig the garden and plant, so I feel sorry for my mother so I used to go and help her. My mother was a very

diplomatic type of a person. She used to praise me that, "Oh, your vegetables. You raising good vegetables." So, made me do more because I knew that she was going to praise me.

And every week we had to wash the veranda. Pretty big veranda, you know. Soap and water, we had to wash 'em. And I go gather firewood for the furo. 'Cause every house has furo, those days.

WN: So this is in addition to the free firewood that the plantation . . .

RK: No. We didn't opt for firewood because we took kerosene, eh.

WN: You could have either one? You cannot have both?

RK: No.

WN: Oh.

RK: If you wanted to buy firewood, they would sell you. Three dollars a cord or something.

WN: Plantation?

RK: Yeah. They sell you, yeah. But there's so many firewood around, all this firewood. But only for the furo, though.

WN: Well, you folks had a big family so . . .

RK: No, no. Our family here was . . .

WN: Eleven children.

RK: . . . five. Yeah, yeah, but they weren't here. One was in the Mainland, and two or three died in Japan, and couple died here. I think the remaining was only five [children].

WN: So out of the eleven, what number were you?

RK: (Pause) Oh, I think about six. I think I was number six, uh huh, yeah. Six or seven or something like that. See, and those days, I still recall, you know, when the wage earner passes away and they used to have about four, five, six, seven children, there's no social security system. There was hardly any social service program. The only way is that the plantation was giving maybe ten dollars a month for credit or food or whatever, right? So the oldest son or daughter--if was daughter was better. She could go and work [as a] maid for the bigshots, right? And that would be about ten dollars a month. Yep, those days. Hard . . .

WN: When did your father die?

RK: Oh, my father passed away during the war years, 1943, I guess.

Yeah. Forty-three.

WN: What about like holidays in the camps? What kind of holidays did you folks celebrate?

RK: Christmas. New Year. Christmas more because we started to get Americanized, right? In school and if you were attending church, Christian church. Not Japanese church, temple, though.

WN: But you were Jōdo, huh?

RK: Yeah, but we didn't care. We despised the minister because in school he was mistreating us, you see. No, any activity down the otera, we didn't care to participate. A bon dance, maybe. Yeah, bon dance. Well, that was more summer months. But then there was no Thanksgiving. My goodness, how can our parents afford turkey?

(Laughter)

WN: What about emperor's birthday?

RK: Yup. Tenno Heika no da kine, huh? I don't know what they used to call . . .

WN: Tenchō-setsu.

RK: Tenchō-setsu, yeah. Tenchō-setsu. The parents make some kind of, da kine black beans rice or something, I don't know. (Chuckles) But as far as we concerned, I had no loyalty to the emperor. You know. I was thinking, why they revere the emperor so damn much? He's only one damn human being to me, you (chuckles) see. But if I mentioned that, ho, I get scolding. First word come out from my father was baka. Because even the president of the United States, right, we don't bow to him or. . . . I used to go, "What this is?" you know. Well, I don't think that everybody felt the way I felt, right?

WN: When you was small kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

RK: I'd say that I had no ambition. I had no ambition.

WN: Did you think you were going to work plantation?

RK: Well, I guess there was no other avenue, right, than the plantation. But, see, there was no--in school, they didn't cultivate the students' abilities. Let's say, well, they just started that carpentry class in Kōloa School. But not everybody can be one carpenter, right? But they required that everybody, seventh grade, go carpentry. But why make one guy who was not interested, was more interested in mechanical things, go learn carpentry? See, that's the fault, right? If you not interested in carpentry, no sense. There was no class for automotive mechanic or something else. Nothing. Well, I guess, they were that backward, yet, as far as education concerned.

WN: What teacher did you like the best at Kōloa School?

RK: Kōloa School? Well, see, up to sixth grade I have a big memory. And most of the teachers that we had is Haole teachers from Mainland. Or if they were local, it was wife of the head bookkeeper of the plantation, or the field overseer, or something like that, see. Even the [plantation] manager's wife used to be teacher here. Well, if you look back, a lot of--I'm not talking about the Normal School graduate. Because when we were growing up, the schoolteachers were so few that they had a crash program. Normal School, two years, you graduate, you can be a teacher. Well, to begin with, if the teacher is blind, no sense you follow. (Chuckles) Right? The fault of our school system, educational system, is that not all the right ones are leading or teaching the students. Blind leading the blind. Like what I tell you, see, what you learn when you young, it stays in here (RK points to head), you know. Just like when I was about fourth or fifth grade, here this teacher overlooking the school classroom. Right across the railroad track, there's cane field. Still there yet. It happened that that year, the tassling was very heavy in the field. The tassling. You know when the cane get . . .

WN: Oh, tassle?

RK: . . . yeah, about November, about the latter part of this month, December. The tassle start sprouting from the cane, see. And she made the remark, "Oh, the plantation going to make lot of sugar this year. Look at all the flowers." (Chuckles) This was when I was about ten years or nine years old, okay. And so, that remark of that teacher, my teacher, stayed with me until I was about eighteen years old. See, when I graduated from high school, about eighteen, I went to work for the plantation. Then I made that remark (WN laughs) to one of the older workers on the plantation. So he told me, "Ey, you stupid. That tassle is not good for the cane."

I said, "Come on."

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 15-56-1-87; SIDE ONE

RK: So he took me to this cane that was tassling. He showed me, see, when the cane tassle, the cane stop growing. You know, the main stalk. Stop growing 'cause the tassle came out. So from the side, they call that the suckers, you know, that start growing. But if the main one was growing, the main tail would be about that big, maybe. If no tassle, it will keep on growing. But when the tassle come out, the cane stop growing there and from the side, small kind . . .

WN: Suckers?

RK: Yeah, suckers come out. So he tell me . . .

WN: Oh, once the suckers come out, no good already, I mean?

RK: No.

WN: It's not as . . .

RK: See, the cane is, from node to node there's a hard part, you see. And normal, maybe six inches, eighteen. The longer the node, it's better. 'Cause that's where the juice is, the sugar content is in there, right? But when the tassle come out, that main stalk stop growing, and from the side small ones come out, and the node is only this wide.

WN: About half inch?

RK: Oh, yeah. Maybe about that. And so he telling me, "You see, no good." He tells me that the plantations on the west side, Kekaha, Kaumakani, Olokele, over there they get more sunshine. So, when you get more sunlight, get less tassling. So the cane tassles more on the windward plantations than on the leeward plantations.

But I harbored that till I was over eighteen years old. How many guys I must have told, "Ey, plenty sugar this year. Look at the flowers." (WN laughs.) And where did I get the information? From a teacher who didn't know anything. And that teacher was a local teacher. Local-born teacher, yeah. That's why, I believe if you want to elevate the educational system in our country, our state, let's do it from the teacher level first.

WN: So there weren't any real good ones that you remember?

RK: Yes, I remember. There was a teacher named Mrs. [Tsui Tashima] Yamagata. Oh, I learn plenty from her about arithmetic.

WN: Mrs. Yamagata?

RK: Yeah, yeah. But the sorry part is that if you pass her class, maybe she's sixth grade, seventh grade you don't have her. So how can you continue because every year you got it more difficult, right? More difficult problems. Arithmetic, yeah. So sixth grade you get a good arithmetic teacher. Seventh grade when the problems come more complicated, you get one teacher that doesn't know anything. How can you learn? So the teacher is very important. Teacher is very important.

WN: So you went up to Kōloa School eighth grade? And then you went to Kaua'i High?

RK: That's right.

WN: How did you get from Kōloa all the way to Līhu'e?

RK: Well, okay. See, fortunately---and here we're talking about 1929, now, okay?

WN: Yeah.

RK: So that was the depression year. Stock market crash---of course, we didn't know, we were more interested in Babe Ruth making fifty-five home runs or something (chuckles), right? Sports was more important to us. Well, anyway, see, transportation--and this was still the Model-T age. Model-A was not out yet, Model-T was. Nineteen twenty-nine, 1930, yeah. And so, luckily, a family in our camp, the son was going to high school so they had to pick up five more passengers. Six with the driver, yeah. I think we paid, I think our parents paid about six dollars a month. But remember now, lot of the workers was still getting one dollar a day. Well, fortunately, my father was working, was getting more than one dollar a day. He had a higher-paying job. And my mother was an industrious person so she used to take lot of washing and used to go clean other people's house, so we could afford. And they were smart playing tanomoshi, see. So, they could afford to keep that tanomoshi till toward the end, see, when they already had taken lot of the interest. Because they got to bid for that, right? In the end, the third or fifth, five, last one, they don't go by bid. 'Cause why should you and I we bid and give anything, right, we don't need that money, right [away], eh?

WN: Right.

RK: So that one, they go by full lot. And then maybe they put a few small percentage here, interest. So if you and I the last one [to bid] now, okay, last two. Go ahead Warren, you pick, you pick out, ah, you got to take, okay? Then I'll be the last one, see. So our parents, my mother was very smart. So tanomoshi alone they used to make money because exorbitant interest if you figure on monthly basis, right? Well, anyway, that's the reason why I was one of the fortunate ones to get a chance to go to high school. Knowing well that [even] if I went to high school and I graduated from high school, my opportunity was the stinking plantation. Couldn't help. There was no other choice for us, you see.

So, I went to high school, graduated. I'd say, struggled to graduate, I guess. You had to get sixteen credits or something to graduate. I was down to eleven credits junior year, so I was called in. Say that if I didn't pick up five more credits I couldn't graduate because I had to get sixteen. So I took five courses and I pass, barely, maybe C, C-minus, or something like that. I passed, yeah. Then that's the way--four years high school. Although I'm not saying that it was waste of time or anything because what I learn is my own, right? Knowledge is your own, right? And later on, I used that knowledge because I was little more advanced in English than the guy that didn't go to high school. Because in high school, at least you learn English, right? And . . .

WN: Were you the first in your family to go to high school?

RK: Yeah. Right. I was the first. Although I didn't set any good example. (Chuckles) But at least I was--later on, of course, I realized that I had an advantage over those that did not go to high school. Take 1941, the outbreak of war. Lot of my friends, they couldn't converse with the soldiers 'cause the first group of soldiers that came that were stationed in Kaua'i, were national guardsmen from New York. And, well, naturally, would speak good English. Over here, "Where you wen go yesterday?" How can they understand?

(Laughter)

RK: So, "I stay going there now, yeah. You wait for me over there." No. I had the advantage, I could converse with the soldier boys. So some of my friends talk with the soldier boys. They couldn't understand each other. (Chuckles) But at least I could make conversation with these soldiers. Well, that's because I had at least the high school education, yeah. And to me, I thought that lot of the soldiers that came from New York, we were more smart than them. That's the way I--you know, I talking to them, right? They didn't know how to add, some of them, you know. National guardsmen, naturally, they wanted to pick up extra money, that's all.

So when I went to work after graduation [in 1933], seventy-five cents a day.

WN: So you worked at... Graduated from high school in '33, you started work at Kōloa plantation?

RK: That's right.

WN: How did you get the job first of all?

RK: Because, don't worry, if you come from a plantation family, that's automatic you get, yeah. All right. Seventy-five cents a day, eleven-hour work, six days a week. But there were guys worse because the factory [i.e., mill] was running twenty-four hours on two twelve-hour shifts. So they were getting dollar a day, but twelve hours now. Not even ten cents an hour. Monday to Saturday. Can you believe it? You couldn't even see the sun, 'cause you go work in the morning five o'clock, right? And you get through work five o'clock in the evening. During the winter months, the days are short.

WN: So you got seventy-five cents? Is that because you were still young boy?

RK: Yeah. Because, in those days, they say because I didn't have the man bango. I was classed as a student yet, even if I had the diploma already. Then I had to show what I could do, probationary period maybe six months or something like that. So the first time I

work, I was assigned to this welding shop. So I was helping this old German welder. So he tell me, "Hey, boy, no need you go high school to do what you doing." Helping him, you see.

So I told him that, "If you went to high school you wouldn't be saying that."

But he didn't catch on to what I meant, you know. Because if he had caught on what I meant, he would chase me all over with that [blow] torch (chuckles) in his hand. But what I meant to tell him was that if he had a high school education, he wouldn't be talking nonsense like that. Telling me that I didn't have to go high school to do what I was doing, you see. That was in 1933. Seventy-five cents a day.

WN: How come they classified you as boy? Because you were full-time, right? Pau school.

RK: Yeah. That's the policy of the plantation.

WN: Until how old are you a boy?

RK: Well, that's why, see, up till you got job like a job in the factory, then you'll come man bango, they call that. Then you get dollar a day. But then you have to work twelve hours a day, too. But from seventy-five cents to one dollar, that's a big jump, right? So, naturally, even if the hour was about one hour and a half more long per day, you still went for that dollar a day, you know. Plus you get more perquisite. When you get man, then you can get your fuel, whatever, the other amenities you could get, you see.

WN: So you started as welder's apprentice in the mill?

RK: Yeah. Help the welder.

WN: How long did you stay at that job?

RK: Oh, about, I think three, four months, I guess. Then there was an opening in the mill, so I went to work in the mill.

WN: The welder's place was in the mill, too?

RK: Yeah. One of those shops adjacent to the mill. I guess this welder was getting, maybe, thirty dollars a month. Nobody could get higher than that. Because this was before the Fair Labor Standards Act, wage and hour act. 'Cause [President Franklin] Roosevelt came into office in 1932 [1933]. Then that New Deal program was passed [in 1938]. But the minimum wage was incrementally spaced [from twenty-five cents an hour] until [it reached] forty cents [eight] years later. But the [sugar] plantations were not abiding by the Fair Labor Standards Act. They said that we were not industrial workers, that we were all agricultural workers. [When the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed in 1938, it did not apply to agricultural workers,

domestic servants, employees in retail establishments, seamen, and others.]

WN: Oh, even the mill workers were classified agricultural?

RK: That's right. That's what they contended, yeah. So when our union [ILWU] came into being in 1945, our lawyers from San Francisco sued the HSPA [Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association] and we got an out-of-court settlement of about two million for violation of the wage and hour law. The reason for that was that the [sugar] plantations contended that every worker in the plantations was agricultural worker and the Fair Labor Standards Act did not apply to agricultural workers. Our lawyers contended that a portion of the sugar workers were industrial. And where they drew the line in the settlement was that when the cane is unloaded to where the sugar come out, all that is industrial workers. And any store, plantation store, were industrial workers. And take the truck drivers now. They haul sugar, that's industrial. But where the truck drivers that were hauling fertilizer and other supplies for the field, they were [considered] agriculture workers. And if the truck driver was hauling agricultural workers, they were agriculture. But if the labor truck that were hauling mill workers, then they were industrial, you see. So they had a complicated settlement and we won that settlement.

WN: Forty-four?

RK: No. I think this settlement was finally culminated back in 1946, yeah. Prior to the first industry-wide strike that we . . .

WN: Yeah. So actually, what was the Fair Labor Standards Act? What was this supposed to . . .

RK: That was under the Roosevelt's [New] Deal, right? That they put a floor on wages and they put a cap on hours. Not more than forty hours a week and not less than forty cents an hour. Forty cents an hour, now. But compared with one dollar a day, twelve hours work, right?

WN: Yes.

RK: Twelve hours . . .

WN: Because like cannery workers at that time were making more than, I think, mill workers in sugar . . .

RK: Oh, yeah. In fact not only that, but in the sugar industry, they had the off-island differential. That the O'ahu sugar workers, Maui, were getting little more pay than the Hawai'i and the Kaua'i workers. There was the differential, mind you, yeah. Working for the same type bosses, same product, yet, because they found that, I guess, the sugar yield is lower on the Big Island than here. O'ahu is very--Waialua [Sugar Company] is a very rich plantation, [and]

Waipahu [i.e., O'ahu Sugar Company], yeah. Of course, we eliminated all that differential. Yeah, we eliminated that. And the Fair Labor Standards Act, of course, today, the minimum wage is \$3.35 [an hour], right? But, remember now, the law says overtime after forty hours, so they can make you work two days, Monday and Tuesday twenty hours, and lay off you for the rest of the week and you still get only straight time. Because you didn't exceed forty hours in that week, you see. But in the union contract, we have overtime after eight hours [a day] and overtime after forty hours in that week. That's time and a half.

WN: That was your first union contract?

RK: No. During the ending years of our agreement, the plantation was still on the forty-hour basis.

WN: Oh.

RK: Yeah. Still on the forty-hour. And the . . .

(Mill whistle blows.)

WN: Pau hana?

RK: Yeah. We couldn't get that until later part, you know. That's three o'clock now, yeah, the workers. . . .

WN: Okay, we going get into the union stuff next time.

RK: All right. Yeah.

WN: You said that you worked couple years after graduating from high school for Kōloa Plantation. So you worked welder's apprentice, [then] you worked in the mill.

RK: That's right, yeah, mill.

WN: And then, what did you do in the mill?

RK: Oh, I was crush tender, and then later on I was an oiler in the mill. But still dollar a day, twelve hours. In other words, six days, and seventy-two hours a week. Yeah, seventy-two hours. And if somebody lay off, the guy that working on the opposite seat of you, because of some emergency, they required you work twenty-four hours straight. Twenty-four. No extra pay. Can you believe it? That's when I used to think about, chee, the only way we can get out of this kind of a hole, this kind of a hell, was forming a union, you see. Little did I know about union structure, although I used to read about CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] and AFL [American Federation of Labor] and all that. But I was thinking that there was nobody going to help you. You had to help yourself, right?

WN: You said that after a few years you got fired? What happened?

RK: The mill engineer [Herman K. Brandt, Jr.], he used to like me. So he took me out from the processing side of the operation and he put me in the shop. Well, there, we worked ten hours and we work only daytime, you see. And the assistant manager, oh, he was a rough-and-tumble guy. He came one morning, asked me if I wanted to work in this boiling house section of the mill. You see, the mill was in two sections. The processing and the boiling house. But I heard, see, that one particular guy, he fought with his foreman and he got fired and he went home. So I knew that he was going ask me if I wanted to work that job. Because that Haole supervisor was a lousy bastard, too, see. So I asked him, "Well, Mr. [Clarence V.] Orme," he was the assistant manager, "are you asking me?"

So he said, "Yeah, I'm asking you."

I said, "Well, I don't like to go there."

So he told me, "If you don't like to go there, there's no work for you over here."

So I said, "Ey, wait. What the hell you talking about." I told him, "You asked me and I gave you my honest answer. You didn't order me to go there." Oh, he thought I was another guy that he was pushing around on the plantation. He started talking rough so I told him, "Look you, son of a bitch," you know. I got mad, I said, "Look, I don't care for the job, okay, but you be fair," I told him. "You asked me and I gave you the answer. What the hell you want me to do?"

"Oh, I don't want you here," he said.

I said, "Look, before you can fire me, I quit." And I told him, you know, I told him, "You son of a bitch." And I called him all kind names and I walked--oh, I was fired anyway, what the hell, right? So I went to go next day to see the manager. Not to be reinstated, but tell him what happened, see.

WN: Who was the manager?

RK: Oh, Iki Moir's father. Hector Moir, yeah.

WN: Yeah, right.

RK: So I told him, "Mr. Moir, I come here, I'm not here asking you to reinstate me because I don't care for the job. But I want you to know my side, hear my side of the story." Because my foreman already told the manager. I heard that he told the manager what happened, you see.

So he told me, "Well, okay, I'll see about it."

But, you know, just cover up, right? That was my first confrontation with management on the plantation, although I knew what kind guys they were anyway. You had no chance arguing with them. Not that you had two strikes on you, you were not even in the ballpark with those guys. I start playing politics because already, at that time, I was of voting age already. I started playing politics and the group of supervisors [I supported], that's the present [Kaua'i County] Council, the majority got in.

WN: Oh, [Kaua'i County] Board of Supervisors?

RK: Yeah, yeah. Those days. And no civil service, so if the administration change, they put in who they like [as county employees], new guys all go in. No more civil service, no protection. So I was--the group that we backed up went in, so we all got jobs in the county.

WN: Oh. Who did you back up?

RK: Oh, we backed up [Noboru] Miyake, Dr. [H. C.] Chang, I don't know who, we backed up about four who happened to comprise the majority of the board of supervisors.

WN: Democrats?

RK: Oh, yeah. All Democrats, yeah. So I got a job in the county.

WN: How did you get . . .

RK: Forty cents an hour, eight days work, okay? Some week we work only three days. But three days I was making more money than the plantation guy who was working six days. With eight-hour work only, you see. Oh, I was doing well working for the county. (Laughs)

WN: Doing what?

RK: Temporary job, you know, clean the streets, (chuckles) and all that. We got a group, about ten of us with the foreman. The foreman was very good friend of ours because we all play politics. We go get a case of beer, in the morning we drinking beer. (Laughs) That's county work for you. (WN laughs.) And election time, oh, they send us to pick 'opihi for the party, election night party. So I used to own one Model-T at that time, see. So very few cars, yet, those days. But, oh, we used to go even fishing, no county work maybe two days, oh, the rest of the week we [go to] Mānā or someplace fishing. That's how we catch a lot of fish. And we come Hanapepe, we exchange [fish] for a meal in the Chinese restaurant. 'Cause the Chinese like the moi, you see. That moi, that was a highly prized fish at that time, which is still today. So, oh, we used to get good fun. But my father was opposed because he said that only bums work in the county, you know.

WN: Only what?

RK: Bums.

WN: Bums?

RK: Yeah. Furyō shōnen. (Chuckles) He said that you can't find respectable people working for the county. Then the Roosevelt's [New] Deal program came into effect, so a lot of federal funds were pumped into the county. Started even in the county level. WPA [Works Progress Administration] work, federal funding, you see, to create more jobs. And so, they transferred us to WPA. And same, forty cents an hour, eight-hour work. But that was better because no such thing that, oh, not enough funds so three days a week. That was straight forty-hour week. And we used to do a lot of pipeline job and all that.

WN: How did you get involved in politics in the first place? You were kinda young, you were about twenty years old, huh?

RK: Yeah. Well, in 1935, I was about, that would be, what, I was born 1915 . . .

WN: Twenty years.

RK: No. Nineteen thirty, I would be fifteen years old, right? Nineteen twenty, yeah, about 1936, I started to vote.

WN: Twenty [twenty-one], yeah.

RK: Yeah, '36, yeah. So, well, when you work county, even if you don't vote, you got to play politics because no civil service. Politics was your civil service, those days. Really, to the victors goes the spoils. The side that win take everything, you see. I happened to be--well, let's put it this way, I can't say talented but very good in politics. When I was a kid, too, while growing up, I used to like to be the leader of the group. Not because I was the bully, I was the smallest. But whatever I do, I used to take charge of the guys much bigger than me. And I used to be their spokesman or whatever. So in politics, that nature of mine came in very handy because I could communicate with the guys and I could lead the guys. So, that's when I started to take active part in politics.

WN: Well, how did you decide who you were going to support?

RK: Well, sometimes the candidate that can play the best music or best song (chuckles), okay, yeah. Or the guy that can yell the most because those days they didn't have any amplifying system, microphone, no. So, usually, you know, other nationality. (RK makes growling noise.) They didn't say--make sense at all, but they could yell and scream. Or one candidate come up, he start playing ukulele and, they say, "Ey, that guy all right." So we vote for him, you see.

WN: Oh, so had nothing to do with . . .

RK: But no Republican, okay?

WN: Oh, okay.

RK: Because I was already ostracized from the plantation. The plantation was synonymous with the Republican party. The Republican party was synonymous with the plantation. We'd support Democrats, you see. And I was rebelling against this political system. So we support more Democrat. And already, this island was, before this advent of the union, this island sent more Democrats to the territorial legislature than other islands. So just take the manager from Kekaha [Sugar Company], Lindsay Faye, run for senate. All Republican. And I used to tell the boys, "Ey, don't vote for that son of a gun, yeah. That's a plantation man." And take Elsie Wilcox. That's from the big Wilcox family [i.e., Grove Farm Plantation]. She was senator, yeah. And, oh, we dump her with Portuguese candidate, Fernandes or Carvalho, yeah.

WN: So Billy Fernandes, I know, beat Lindsay Faye, right?

RK: No, the father.

WN: Oh, J. B.--John?

RK: J. B. John Fernandes, yeah.

WN: He beat Lindsay Faye in [1937], I think?

RK: Oh yeah, something like that. I supported J. B. Fernandes. Oh yeah, I supported J. B. Fernandes. [J. B. Fernandes, a small businessman, defeated incumbent senator Lindsay Faye in 1937 by a vote of 3,204 to 3,012. In 1939, the other senate incumbent, Elsie Wilcox, lost her seat in the Republican primary to another Portuguese businessman, Clem Gomes.]

WN: So that early on, you know, 1935, when you were only about twenty, twenty-one, you already had a consciousness of, you know, Democrats and Republicans. Republicans representing the establishment and the plantation and the Democrats were . . .

RK: That's right, yeah. See, I thought there was one unequal law, there was an inequity. Because I used to own one car, okay, and my Model-T, I don't think that Model-T weighed more than 1,500 pounds. You know how Model-T used to be light. And I was paying, per pound, one cent per pound, and the big trucks were paying one cent a pound, too. And I could see I wasn't damaging the road. Those big trucks were damaging the road. But, then, who was our senator? He was the president, the owner of the Nāwiliwili Transportation Company.

WN: Who was?

RK: Clem Gomes. So those things awaken me, see. I said, "Ey, I supported that son of a gun. He good ukulele player that, see."

Local boy. But then why should I be paying the same rate on my Model-T as his big trucks pay? Well, naturally, he was in the senate. Right? And I was a fool to be supporting him. So I don't know what year, oh, this was later on [1948], after the union came up, yeah. We dumped him. [Gomes was defeated by ILWU-backed candidate Manuel Aguiar.] He died the next morning [of a heart attack].

WN: Oh, yeah?

RK: Yeah.

WN: Clem Gomes?

RK: Gomes.

WN: He was a Republican?

RK: Republican. President of the Nāwiliwili Transportation Company, yeah. You try dig up on him. I think, if I'm not mistaken, [the day after] the 1948 election, he passed away. But, see, what we felt too, already after 1938 when I got married and I went back to the plantation. Here, the plantation office workers, most of them were plantation stooges. Same nationality like us, but they work in the plantation office. And they getting salary, maybe eighty dollars a month or sixty-five dollars a month. They were little better than us. What I mean is that they used to get vacation, they work only eight hours, they work in necktie. And, naturally, if you make eighty dollars a month and here we making thirty dollars, they were two and a half times more affluent than us, you know. Election time, they come house to house. They come to my house say, "Ey, Bob, the boss like you support this workers because there's a slate out now, you know."

I say, "Yeah, okay, okay," you know.

But where I live in the [New Mill] Japanese Camp down there, our house was just like the clubhouse. All the boys used to come my house, drink coffee, and talk story. And I used to preach to them, I said, "What the hell. Look how they mistreating us. What the hell we going back up there, guys," you know. Of course, if what I say went back to the higher-ups I would be fired, right. But I didn't give a damn already. Because I was married, my wife [Sue Watanabe Kunimura] was from Honolulu. And I got married [in 1938] and I said, "What the hell, if I get fired, I can go Honolulu anytime."

But this was already almost the outbreak of Pearl Harbor, you see. So, here, the plantation workers were more awakening at that period. So, on this island, the plantation-backed candidates, they pick from the high level of the plantation. Managers, or like Wilcox, they own, right? Gomes, he own one transportation company. You know, the owners or their stooges, Republican party pick. Here, the

plantation office workers come about four or five of them, you know, come to your house and say, "Ey, the boss like you support this."

We didn't listen to that. So I used to tell my friends, "Look, only time they come around here is when they want us to support 'em. And soon as we put 'em in, you no going see these son of guns come for the next four years. Why should we go, yeah?" So, oh boy, we had a good understanding about not supporting that plantation candidates. So they had hell of a time. The Haole bosses had hard time getting in on this island. Of course, when the union came, we could come out into the open, right, yeah. You come out in the open.

WN: Do you think we can stop here and then next time we continue from this point on?

RK: Yeah. Okay, yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape Nos. 15-62-2-87 and 15-63-2-87

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Robert Kunimura (RK)

December 1, 1987

Kōloa, Kaua'i

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Kunimura on December 1, 1987 in Kōloa. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Bob, the last time, we were talking about your WPA, you worked for the county from '35 to '38, and in '38 you started working Kōloa [Sugar] Plantation again?

RK: Right.

WN: Okay. Before we get into that part, you were telling me some stories about when you folks were small kid time.

RK: Oh.

WN: You know, and then you were telling me about how you folks "invented the bikini." (Chuckles)

RK: Yeah, well, the boys, Kōloa boys, got caught from the superintendent of public instruction of Kaua'i, Bernice Harden. She happened to pass where we were swimming and every . . .

WN: Where was this?

RK: Where? Right up here, right across the [Tao] Shell Service Station. Right across here over here. And, well, we all got reprimanded next day by the Kōloa School principal because we were swimming all naked.

So one of the boys got a good idea, see, "Hey, why don't we save empty [Bull] Durham bags, yeah."

And I guess that's where we felt that we were not naked. At least we got that part covered, right?

(Laughter)

RK: Yeah. So for the bigger boys, the Durham bag is too small. So they

used to get another kind of a cigarette, smoking tobacco. They used to call 'em Red Indian. Comes in little bigger bags. So we used to tell to the older boys, "You know what, use the Red Indian bags, see, cover over here."

WN: And that was okay for the teachers, by the teachers?

RK: No, no, no, no. Didn't pass the teachers, but we felt that, well, at least we were not naked. And not knowing what not naked constituted in the eyes of the teacher or the principal, right?

WN: (Laughs) You mean, covered front and back?

RK: No, no, only the front. (WN laughs.) We just didn't have bathing suits those days, right? Our parents could not afford to buy us bathing suit. And nobody wore shorts, so the most convenient thing was wear nothing and jump in the water. Of course, this is more in the town where there is some stream where we can go and take a dip. But when we up the hills, well, we don't care because we know nobody's going to be around there, so we used to, you know. 'Cause very seldom we used to go down the beach, ocean, to swim. It was more in the irrigation ditch or some drainage ditch which was lot bigger and deeper, you see. Or reservoir. As we grew older, we used to go into the reservoir and make raft out of bulrushes. Yeah, we used to cut a huge amount of bulrushes. And that hau bush, we used to tie about three logs. Tie 'em tight and that thing floats. You know, the bulrush, floats, see. That's the way we used to go and conquer the deep places, ride on that bulrush.

WN: Oh, oh, you used it like a board?

RK: Yeah, it floats, see, yeah. Right, right, right. Because we didn't have automobile [inner] tubes those days. Hardly any cars to begin with, right? So that's one way we used to penetrate into the deep waters, we used to cut bulrushes. And then we could cross the reservoir, small reservoir, we could cross 'em about two of us ride in the bulrush. And paddling with our hand, we could go right across. And the reservoir used to be deep. Well, let's say ten, twelve, twenty feet deep some of those reservoirs. Nobody taught us how to swim. At least it's more difficult to swim in the fresh water than the salt water. Because fresh water was heavier. You sink faster.

WN: When you folks were kids, what kind of stuff you did to get into trouble? Mischief?

RK: Well, the mischievous months were the summer vacation months, June, July, August. There were no supervision, there was no summer school or anything. We were just left alone, do what we wanted. So that's the three months. Summer month is when mango, guava, mountain apple in season so we were quite busy, going looking for. Also, we used to live near the ocean, much nearer than these Kōloa town children. So . . .

WN: You mean, when you folks lived by New Mill?

RK: Yeah, right, right. So it was not only for the enjoyment when we used to go fishing down the beach. Was to bring home food for the family. Then, well, help out at least, right? They couldn't buy meat, those days. And the fish peddler, very seldom they come up there. And yet, even if the fish costs twenty-five cents a bundle, that's out of one dollar they have to buy maybe two bunch, two bundle fish. That's half a dollar, you know. So, fish were plentiful. Ho, fish were plentiful. And even with the crude lantern and equipment that we had, we brought home plenty fish for our family to eat. Of course, the problem was no refrigeration so they had to preserve the fish, salt or dry the fish.

WN: You folks used to steal stuff at the stores and stuff or . . .

RK: Oh, yeah. What law they have now? Pil---what that . . .

WN: Shoplifting?

RK: Yeah, shoplifting, well. Well, those days, yes. So a lot of the merchants when they see us coming in, oh, my goodness, you know, they put the alarm on. (Laughs)

WN: Who were some of your friends? Who were some friends that you hung out with?

RK: Well, I guess, wait now. Some of them, oh, a lot of them not living here; some passed away, yeah. You see, like Ike [Richard Okamura], we about close in age, but then because he lived in Kōloa town and we used to live at the mill camp, we were not that close. But a lot of these younger ones than me, they still living.

WN: Okay, so, let's get back to 1938, when you started working for Kōloa [Sugar] Plantation, again. How come you went back to the plantation after you worked . . .

RK: Yeah, because I decided to get married, and at least working plantation you had house, medical, fuel, and steady job. Plantation was not seasonal job, see, steady. And this was 1938. Already on some plantations, union movement was going on already. So when I went to request for job, the first question asked by the mill engineer was, if I was implicated with the union. And, well, I didn't know too much about the National Labor Relations Act, but I felt at that time that that was illegal for him to ask me that question. But we couldn't do anything, so I answered, "No, I'm not, I don't know what you're talking about," I told him that, yeah. So he hired me.

WN: What was your pay when you first got hired?

RK: Oh, 1938, I'm sure it was about maybe \$1.50 a day, I guess. Oh, let's say, eight hours, maybe twenty-five cents an hour, twenty

cents an hour, uh huh. But remember now, they deduct from you the perquisites. So they deduct house, medical, water, fuel. Arbitrarily, they said that our perquisite was costing them eight cents an hour. But then at that time war had already broke out in Europe. And America was preparing for the war. Of course, the war came about two years later than the European war. And at that time, just some of the lucky ones, this is after Pearl Harbor, the army commandeered lot of equipment from the plantations. And if you were the operator of that particular equipment that the army commandeered, well, they were getting at least dollar one hour. The army pay the plantation and the plantation used to pay the worker. So he wasn't getting dollar one hour, but little more than he would have received working on a plantation. That's the way they used to do it. In other words, at that time, the outside workers, USED [United States Engineering Division] workers. Civilian workers working for the army, not in the armed--you civilian . . .

WN: Non-military?

RK: Not military, yeah. Of course, it wasn't too bad because, I'm talking about after Pearl Harbor now, yeah. President Roosevelt was in office so they passed some kind of a law. They froze wages, but they froze prices, too. So they had OPA, that is Office of Price Administration. So it's not bad, if they freeze wages and if they freeze prices then that's okay, not bad. That's what was happening during the war years. But they couldn't get any union because the military wouldn't allow any union, they used to tell.

WN: So when you first started, 1938, and then you got married around that time, too, where did you live?

RK: Oh, with my parents.

WN: Oh.

RK: Yeah. Because even if you got married, they [plantation] give you a house but then, where you going sleep? On the floor? Or you going to cook on the outside stove (chuckles)?

WN: So actually, then, you were getting your perquisites deducted when really you were living off your father's perquisites?

RK: That was the point of the injustice, inequity at that time. So if you had three workers from the same house, they all would be deducted eight cents an hour. Also, when you made overtime, see, whoever worked overtime paid more because, regardless, they were deducting that eight cents. So let's say you worked forty-eight hours that week. You were being deducted eight times forty-eight hours. And if I worked twenty hours that week, let's take one figure. So I was getting deducted eight times twenty. And if you made overtime, they were deducting from you.

WN: At that time your father was still working for the plantation?

RK: Yeah. He was still working for the plantation. He passed away about '42, right after the outbreak of war, about '42, yeah.

WN: So you went back to work plantation because of the stability, job security?

RK: Well, that's right, that's right.

WN: Was a cut in pay though, right?

RK: Oh, yeah. Cut in pay, but then if you get married you can't stay in one rooming house. If you single you can stay and even sleep in somebody's garage, right? But after you get married, you need one home. Naturally, you going get family, right? And medical is important, because you're bound to get children. Medical was very important. Although not the best doctors in the world or the best hospital in the world, but then at least you had some basic care, medical.

WN: So you got medical from the plantation, and you lived with your parents?

RK: That's right. Yeah.

WN: I see. Well, you know when the---oh, what was your first job in the mill?

RK: Oh, my first job was what they used to call crusher tender.

WN: Crusher tender?

RK: Yeah. See, as the cane is unloaded it goes through on this conveyor up to the knife where the knife cuts the cane in small lengths. And then from there, it goes into the crusher, see. Crusher is not like a mill. Crusher was more coarse. And after that, I was promoted to oil tender, oiler. But it's a funny thing, even if you get promoted, you didn't get any pay increase. (Chuckles)

WN: You know, when you got fired from the plantation . . .

RK: That's way back . . .

WN: . . . in '35, right, '35?

Rk: Thirty-five, yeah.

WN: Was the manager who fired you still there [when you came back to work for the plantation]?

RK: Assistant manager?

WN: Yeah. He was still there?

RK: Yeah, they were there.

WN: They remembered you . . .

RK: No, no, no. That's one thing, I guess, they kick around so many guys that they couldn't keep up the (chuckles) blacklisting the guys, yeah. Because, I guess, my confrontation with that particular official of the company was not that serious like if I was involved in organizing of the union, or I wanted to burn the manager's house. Not (chuckles) serious like that. I guess, they didn't even put it down in my record. What also helped was that my father had a good job in the mill, see. So the place that I work for, in fact, we were family friends.

WN: Was your father considered a good worker?

RK: Yeah, because he was salaried. Oh, at that time, he was making, oh, substantially more than hourly paid workers. Yeah, he was a salaried worker. Of course, comparing today, not even the janitor make that kind pay (chuckles).

WN: You know, there was some union activity going on.

RK: Yeah, way back in 1938.

WN: Was there any going on at the [Kōloa] Plantation?

RK: They tried. They tried and the company, the manager intimidate the people involved. And, well, they smashed that in its bud. Remember now, we were American Factors' plantation. And they were pretty vicious. American Factors was pretty vicious plantation, yeah.

WN: Who was involved in those early union activities?

RK: Well, as far as I know, we heard and read about Jack Hall was on this island and that there was certain people, stevedores from Port Allen, that were involved. But not anybody from Kōloa. Nobody from Kōloa.

WN: So I know in about '37 or so, Port Allen stevedores were . . .

RK: They had a union already, yeah [Port Allen Waterfront Workers' Association].

WN: Did they come into Kōloa at all to get the . . .

RK: Yeah. They came to solicit for funds, but the plantation--the company had the workers pretty well controlled, intimidated, yeah. So, oh, maybe few donated, but they not going donate openly. 'Cause if the manager ever found out that you donated can of sardines and two cans of pork and beans to the strikers, you were going to get reprimanded. That's how they controlled the workers at that time. The workers were, let's put it this way, pretty well controlled,

okay? You had to do what the plantation say. Of course, this is close to when the union came here, right? We are talking about 1940--no, or '38, '39, '40. But you got to leave the war years out because we were. . . . Another reason why the plantation wanted martial law was because they had it just like martial law without the war. And the military is not going look after the workers, right? For that matter, military of any country going to look [out] for the people that control the industry. No argument about that, you know. So during the war years, well, the union movement was dormant as far as Hawai'i was concerned. And, yet, the workers, the outside workers were making good money because lot of overtime. At least they were getting dollar one hour. And those days dollar one hour, you know, that's big money.

WN: But prior to the war when like the Port Allen longshoremen came to solicit, did you give anything?

RK: Well, at that particular time, I was not back on the plantation.

WN: Nineteen thirty-seven, yeah, you were still at WPA?

RK: Yeah, I was outside and I heard about that they were on strike. [On April 22, 1937, the Port Allen longshoremen went on strike against Kaua'i Terminals for overtime pay for work over eight hours.] And my sympathy was with them. But the plantation, the workers were already starting to perk a little. You can't suppress anybody too long. Somewhere along the line, they're going to rise. And the workers were already starting to show the discontent that they had. Well . . .

WN: How did they show . . .

RK: . . . not union but politically.

WN: Oh, I see.

RK: Yeah. Politically. Because the plantation want the workers to vote for the Republican candidate. And the Republican candidate was either a manager of another plantation, was like from the Wilcox family, they controlled practically all of Līhu'e, or all their stooges, people that they could control. That included Japanese politicians that they could control. That's the ones the plantation wanted the workers to support. But funny, this island, they couldn't put their wishes into politics. Somehow, the workers rebelled and they voted against those Republicans. Well, luckily, because we had a millionaire like the Rice family. They were against the plantation. There was a split . . .

RK: Yeah, why was that?

RK: Well, because of politics. Yeah, because of politics. I don't know the real inside dope, but the Rices quit growing sugarcane because Līhu'e Plantation, from two and a half bags, the milling charge,

said they're going to raise 'em to three bags. What I mean is that for every ten bags of sugar produced from the Kīpū Plantation--because Kīpū didn't own any mill, they had to send 'em to Līhu'e Mill. And where they used to charge two and half bags, or in other words, 25 percent, they raise 'em to three bags. So they quit raising sugar cane, and they turned that place into cattle ranch. You know where the Kīpū?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah, yeah. Nice place, yeah?

WN: It's by Grove---before . . .

RK: Before you reach Grove Farm, yeah. Well, the Rice family, that's a big family, see. They're related to the Wilcoxes and the Baldwins in Maui. The one we had here was a former senator, Charlie Rice. So he bolted from the Republican party, and I think at that time, this was back in the '30s, '32 campaign, he donated \$1,000 to the Democrats, the Roosevelt campaign. And that \$1,000 those days, maybe today is \$25,000, \$50,000, you know the value of money at that time. So this island from before the union was very independent politically. You have to give credit to guys like Charlie Rice, millionaire, big landowner.

WN: So like, because Charlie Rice was a influential person on this island, he was a Democrat, you know, the people that he supported, a lot of them got in? Democrats? For example, who?

RK: Oh, yes. Because Mr. Rice was at one time police commissioner. And another time he was liquor commissioner. So the two commissions, you can wield lot of political power. And, well, I'm talking about after we got our union started here. Oh yeah, we got together and we put people in office and we kicked some rascals out of office. Remember now, see, it's easier to break a politician than make a politician. You don't need too many votes to defeat a guy. But to make one guy, you need a lot of votes. And you know, just a matter of, oh, who Charlie Rice is supporting. That used to free lot of votes, yeah. And at that time, didn't have that strong civil service law like today. Ho, the police wen go all out when Charlie Rice said, "I want Joe Blow to get in." Ho, boy, every policemen was going all out for, yeah. . . . Well, he was a very--not only very powerful man, but well liked.

WN: So he appealed to the workingman?

RK: That's right, yeah. He was a good Joe. Yeah, he was a good Joe. He was not the Haole that had coat and tie on, you know. He was, well, he was always like this, you know. (WN laughs.)

WN: He was like a maverick, then?

RK: Yeah, right, right. He was a political maverick, yeah.

WN: Okay. So then, early as the late '30s, then, you could sort of see . . .

RK: Yeah. Correct, yeah.

WN: . . . discontent . . .

RK: Yeah, that's right.

WN: . . . at the polls?

RK: Yeah, the political rebellion was brewing on this island.

WN: Around that time, too, not only the longshoremen, but Kaua'i Pine, I think, was . . .

RK: Yeah. Well, you see, the thing is that they hit the A&B outfit. Port Allen was Kaua'i Terminals, that's Alexander & Baldwin. And they went to McBryde Sugar Company which was an A&B outfit. And Kaua'i Pine was also A&B, yeah.

WN: I see.

RK: I guess, could be that A&B was a softer touch than American Factors or--well, we don't have Castle & Cooke on this island. We had C. Brewer, that was Kīlauea [Plantation]. But the dominant plantation on this island was all American Factors. Līhu'e, Grove Farm was American Factors, Kekaha. The three largest plantations was all American Factors' plantations.

WN: So then they were going for A&B first, then?

RK: Yeah. I guess, because the union movement started from the maritime unions. See, Matson Navigation Company, unlike today, which is 100 percent owned by Alexander & Baldwin. At that time all the various Big Five, they had a proportionate share of Matson Navigation Company. And Matson was the only carrier, carry sugar, molasses, pineapple to the Mainland. No [other] ship could go into that deal. And coming over, they bringing all the groceries and whatever, rice and whatever we need over here. So the unions, the maritime unions, the West Coast ports and the workers in the ships, the freighters, were all highly organized. In fact, they had closed shop, which is little more powerful than union shop. See, the hiring hall--they had hiring hall--the unions dispatched the workers. So, I guess, unions must have sent couriers and representatives here because--even the maritime unions--if Hawaiian Islands were not organized, they couldn't have the solidarity. Because when they come to Hawai'i, no place union. I think that's how the union started in Hawai'i, through the ports, then from there they branch out. Yeah, that's how we started.

WN: So it's hard for the West Coast longshoremen to stay on strike when Hawai'i was not organized?

RK: Hawai'i was, right, not organized. And for that matter, see, when the island stevedores went out on strike, the ship crews wouldn't supply no steam or anything, right? That's how union solidarity is based on. That if you want strong union, you must get everybody in the union, not only the West Coast port and the ship. But when they reach Hawai'i, there's no union.

WN: I'm wondering, was there a movement to organize McBryde Sugar?

RK: Yeah. They had organized their sugar.

WN: And wasn't too successful?

RK: Well, yeah. I guess they had the election, but, you see, at that time, under the National Labor Relations Act, that law covered only industrial workers. And on a plantation, if there's 100 workers on the plantation, sixty-five would be agriculture. So let's say, 35 percent and less would be industrial workers. And, see, where's the line to say this is ag [agricultural] workers and this is industrial workers. Well, the union lawyers, San Francisco union lawyers, in behalf of the union here, sued the HSPA [in 1945] for back pay. About what we are telling you, that we were not getting time and a half because they were deducting that perquisite, right, yeah, all that. Well, anyway, the settlement was about million and a half. Well, that's a huge amount of money way back in 1945, '46, you know.

Well, anyway when McBryde Plantation had the election to confirm the union, more workers were not in because they couldn't be protected by the federal law [because they were considered to be agricultural workers]. Later on, when we--when the Democrats controlled the territorial legislature, the senate and the house--I don't know what year we controlled that, yeah--they passed the Little Wagner Act. That's to give the agriculture workers in Hawai'i . . .

WN: The right to organize?

RK: . . . right to organize, yeah, and be certified.

WN: I see. So, at the time that the longshoremen were going out, they were protected by the National Labor Relations Act because they were . . .

RK: They're industrial workers.

WN: . . . industrial workers. Okay.

RK: Yeah, right, right. But the big question was plantation and pineapple workers, you see. Too many agriculture workers.

WN: So Kaua'i Pine was only the cannery that organized? [In May 1939, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers (UCAPAWA) Local 76 organized the nonagricultural workers of Kaua'i Pine.]

RK: Right.

WN: Oh, I guess 'cause the pineapple field workers were more contract, anyway?

RK: No, agricultural workers. But the problem was, you see, if they settled sugar, then the pineapple would--because they're the same orders. A&B own Kaua'i Pine, and American Factors own Hawaiian Canneries, and Castle & Cooke own Dole. Yeah, it's the same guys own.

WN: So the fact that the plantation field workers couldn't organize, was that, you think, why these strikes like the [1937] Port Allen strike failed?

RK: You mean the union couldn't prosper, you mean, strive?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Well, just like on a island in the big ocean. Pretty hard to survive that way, yeah.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

RK: As soon as the territory passed the Little Wagner Act, it was easier to organize the rest of the [i.e., agricultural] workers on the [sugar] plantations and the pineapple companies because the company agreed that through cross-check, that if we had the majority, they will recognize. What that means, a cross-check, is that we had a petition, circulate petition. "Are you in favor of our union? ILWU represent you," and you sign the name. So, cross-check means that you didn't have to go through secret ballot and all that. We submit this petition to the company and they went through the signatures, and they said, "Oh, majority." So certified. That was the Little Wagner Act, Hawai'i law.

WN: That was passed before the war or after the war?

RK: Oh, no. These are all after the war. [Final passage of the Little Wagner Act occurred May 1, 1945.]

WN: After the war. So these early strike . . .

RK: Remember, now, Warren, this is after we organized and we became powerful politically. We put lot of our guys into--not our guys, but the Democrats--into office and they passed this law, okay?

WN: Okay. So these early strikes like the Port Allen and so forth, what union was that?

RK: Well, I'm not too familiar, that's the time that when I was out [Port Allen Waterfront Workers' Association]. And I know that the year I was married [1938], my wife and the family had to come to Kaua'i from Honolulu on this interisland steamer because there was no plane service at that time. I still remember that when I went to the Nāwiliwili dock to meet my future wife and the family, there was a huge picket line. The workers on the interisland ship were on strike, 1938. That's when about dozen Hilo workers got shot . . .

WN: Hilo Massacre, right?

RK: Yeah, Hilo Massacre. Yeah, that's the same year. And that was the part of the struggle was on Kaua'i, too, yeah. And here, I didn't know what the picket line, I didn't know what the hell strike and all. And that was 1938, I still remember, yeah. [The CIO Inland Boatmen's Union struck the Interisland Steam Navigation Company.]

WN: So, when did you first get exposed to ILWU?

RK: Oh. This was in 1945, yeah, early 1945, and already I heard, it was out in the paper that they were organizing Hawai'i, Maui, O'ahu. And Kaua'i was the last island to be organized. So I was waiting for somebody to approach me to sign that petition for union representation. And nobody came to see me. Then, one day, couple of guys from Līhu'e, I know them, asked me, hey, if I was interested in starting one union. So I said, "No question. Give me all the necessary things," okay, right. So they told me that, see, the organizers from Honolulu were longshoremen, stevedores. And the mistake they made was that they came here blindly, they didn't know who to contact. One of the organizers from Honolulu was a Portuguese guy. So he went to see one of the Portuguese guys over here. And that Portuguese happened to be one supervisor. That's the biggest mistake to make, right? And another mistake was that he was pro-company man so he reported to the manager. They [i.e., union] couldn't move because they went to see all supervisors. See, they the last ones you going see because they not exploited like the other workers.

WN: You mean these were upper-level management or lunas type?

RK: Yeah, luna type. But that's the one with the longest time, that level. They wanted to go up and up. (Chuckles) So, anyway, they couldn't make a go so they came to see me. So I said, "Okay, give me all that, I call a meeting up." I was living down the mill there and my house used to be--I was married already, I had children, kids--my house used to be just like clubhouse. The boys used to come my house and drink coffee, talk story. So I said, "Ey, come over my house." I invited all the boys. I said, "Hey, we go start the union here. No ask me about union because I wouldn't be able to give you answer, but get this straight, it's better than what we get now, we get nothing." (Laughs) Oh, everybody sign, yeah. And of course, management knew there was a movement. They didn't know who was, only thing, you see. And so, luckily, I was working in the

plantation motor pool. So that's just like the nerve center of (laughs) the operation. You know, guys come, we call on the side, "Ey, union." Oh, everybody was gung ho, because here we suffered '42, '43, '44, three years during the war. They said we were frozen. We couldn't quit the plantation, we couldn't go outside work, okay, we suffered, all right. So the workers were up to their nose as far as fed up was concerned. So it was no problem to sign up these workers. Very rarely did we come across somebody said, "Oh, let me think it over" or "I have to go home and see my wife," you know. No, rarely. They . . .

WN: But still, before the Wagner Act was passed . . .

RK: No, no, Wagner Act was passed in '33 or '34 [1935].

WN: I mean, Little Wagner Act [1945]?

RK: That's right, before the [Little] Wagner Act.

WN: So how did you folks--did you folks anticipate them passing the Little Wagner Act?

RK: No. We made sure, see, we were instructed, try organize the industrial workers [on the plantations]. Well, we knew for certain that the workers in the mill, you know where they dump the cane? Okay, and where the sugar goes out, we were certain they were industrial workers. And we felt that, oh, the shop, the machine shop, the mechanic shop where I used to work, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, welding shop, we kind of felt that they were industrial. And the locomotive department because, those days, still haul cane by locomotive.

WN: So you weren't signing up any field workers?

RK: No.

WN: Oh, okay, I'm sorry.

RK: Okay, all right. Now, we know the hanawai man, the irrigator, we know for sure they agriculture. Or the guys that go spray [insecticide], apply fertilizer, oh, we knew for sure. But see, the doubt was whether the manager's yardman was an industrial or agricultural worker. Dairy, you say, "Oh, the hell dairy is." But there was doubt. We said, sign [them] up. Nothing to lose.

And so after we got the required amount, more than the requirement amount, everybody was joining, trying to join in. And I was the key guy over here. Not one time the manager approach me to intimidate me or. . . . No, not one time. I'm sure it's because the Big Five at that time already got together and decided, well, "We can't stop 'em so let 'em have the union. We'll take 'em on some other time and destroy the union." Well, anyway we had the required--more than the required amount, so we petitioned the National Labor Relations

Board to conduct an election. See, they go to every area. So the plantation get their observers, the union get their observers to see, just like a county, state election. You got to make sure that the right guys go vote. And we had an election at this old courthouse here, and we had better percentage than Ivory Soap.

(Laughter)

RK: Ivory Soap was 99-44/100 [percent], huh? We had higher than that, yeah. Oh, my goodness. I think the only one that voted no, one or two, I think they had the ballot upside down.

(Laughter)

RK: So, we were certified. Of course, we thought that "Chee, now we get everything." But the trouble just started yet. In retrospect, I can say that trouble started from there.

WN: Did you think, eventually, that you folks were going to be able to organize the field workers, too, at that time?

RK: Oh, they were dying to get in, yeah. They were dying to get in. But what you going do? No protection. And I think if we didn't have the National Labor Relations Act, we would get hard time to organize, too. Unless we use the tactics like how they organized the auto industry or the mines. Lot of mileage, huh, sitting strikes which is. . . . The unions--workers would go out on strike if it meant wages, working conditions. But it's hard to get workers to go out on strike just for recognition. That's two different issue, you see. So, luckily, we had the National Labor Relations Act. That guaranteed us the right to organize, and the right to be recognized, and collective bargaining.

WN: So at that time, the early days, you knew that you were protected by the National Labor Relations Act, and the fact that the manager never confronted you?

RK: No.

WN: You didn't feel at all that, okay, you're married, you had three kids, you didn't feel worried at all that you might lose your job?

RK: No. I guess, when you take such a responsibility like that, you have to look at the dark side too, right? What would happen and personally I felt if I'm in this much, I'm going all out, okay. I always felt that if you're going to do something, accomplish the best. No halfway about it. And so, we were a small outfit here because we were not affiliated with Grove Farm yet. Kōloa was a separate [plantation]. And remember now, 1946 we had a seventy-nine-day strike. We were small, but we held our own, yeah, we held our own. And after the strike--well, this were all planned by the industry already--Grove Farm took over Kōloa Sugar.

WN: Nineteen forty-eight?

RK: Forty, yeah, '47, '48, yeah. So---the book says '48?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah, '48, yeah. So there's our big problem now. How many guys got laid off [as a result of the merger]? And yet, the company, the union was not that strong. So, I was one of them, out, yeah. But I was working for the union [by then], see [1947-1951].

WN: I see. That's right.

RK: See, Jack Hall came and we advised the workers who got the pink slip not to go and get the severance pay. They [i.e., management] were using the severance pay just like bait. And lot of our guys went to go and get the severance pay. So only eleven of us refused to go get severance pay. And when we resolved this, we were all reinstated to the company. In fact, I don't know--five, six months free rent and everything, we won that, yeah. But, too bad that workers, you know, you give 'em advice but if it involve \$500, well, those days \$500, you could buy one house lot, you know, yeah, you could buy one house lot. So, they don't listen, yeah, they don't listen.

WN: How many workers you talking about? How many were laid off because of the merger?

RK: Oh, maybe, I would say, maybe, fifty, sixty, I guess, yeah. But in there, ho, lot of the militant union guys, see. Militant union guys.

WN: Before we get to the merger part, how did you meet Jack Hall?

RK: In one these, his island meetings. In the early days, he couldn't come to every plantation so he had a meeting in Lihue, and all the representatives from Kekaha to Kilauea attended the meeting with him. That's when I met him. And later on, when we were more better organized, he used to come and address the Kōloa workers.

WN: What were your first impressions of him?

RK: Well, my first impression of him was that--you see, I tell you something, that today, in retrospect, I can say this, that we thought in the early days that, "Oh, the companies violating the law so let's go sue them and get," you see. I made a big mistake that when you fight anything in litigation, take years and years because they're going to appeal and they going say this, you know. I mean, the industry because they get the money, they get the lawyers, okay. And here we depending too much on laws to protect us. How? After all, who make the law, right? That's the rich man and his stooges make all the law, right?

Well, anyway, my impression of Jack Hall was that he didn't come here with too much on the law because he's not a lawyer, he was more a common worker, see. Whereas some others that they sent here, oh, they talk about law, so, we depended too much on the law to support us, you know. And, you can't achieve anything like that. You got to get 'em with your own power, right? Your economic power, that's the right to strike; and your political power, the power to elect your friends or somebody from your group to go and make the law, you see. So, I felt, yeah, that he was a good rabble-rouser. Yeah, was a good rabble-rouser.

And, see, long before we had union, this is back in '38, I was thinking about, "Chee, why can't we have union?" And all over the state [territory] every plantation [would] have a union. I used to harbor that dream. Sure enough, you know what (chuckles) came out? I went couple of times around the state [territory] with Jack Hall. Not plantation to plantation, but regional meetings, you know, on all the islands, meet with the leaders. So, in a way, what I was thinking, our salvation in the plantation was that we should have a union. Because it was not a matter of wages and working conditions, but pride.

Before, when you meet your relative or your friend from Honolulu, he say, "Where you work?" He ask us, "Where you working?"

We hate to tell them that we working plantation. Because when you say you working for the plantation, you were pitied. That it was synonymous with one dollar a day and that you were living in one old plantation shack. So, union, to me, union is pride where. . . . I got one lawyer brother-in-law. You know what I told him one day? He and I argue about unions, see. So I told him, "You know the difference between you and me?"

He said, "What?"

I said, "You get license and I don't have license." I told him that. Oh, my sister almost threw me out of the house.

(Laughter)

RK: Because, here, I know he's a licensed lawyer, right? But lot of things that he telling me, he arguing with me, to me doesn't make sense. I'm not a lawyer, but, my goodness, I know certain things. Warren, today, you see, the workers, they got dignity. I talk about plantation workers. Most of them own their own house, okay? And I know for sure most of them don't even get mortgage hanging around their neck. The house is paid up. Nice homes. Good pension and, above all, you not afraid to say, "I used to work for the plantation. I was a union man. I retired from the company," see.

My family, my wife side now, she get, what, six girls, sisters, and two brothers. All go Honolulu. Yeah, she's from Honolulu. Born here, but raised in Honolulu. And I don't feel inferior to them.

There was a time when I was working for the plantation, I was overcome with inferiority complex. And no human being supposed to get that feeling. You're not supposed to get superior complex, but, hell, inferior complex, there's no excuse, right? But if you subjugated, you were exploited, you cannot help but be inferior. That's the way I feel, see.

And I'm among a crowd politically on this island because my brother [Tony Kunimura] is the mayor. And I had to go and help out in the campaign, too. I got to make some speeches sometimes. But, Warren, let me tell you something. Even if I come from the plantation and I didn't have the higher education, I feel that experience has taught me plenty. That I can go to a meeting with engineers, lawyers, and I can express myself. I'm not afraid to do that today. And that, I owe to the union, Warren. I learned that technique. In fact, lot of times, politically, because these professionals that I talking about, engineers and lawyers and consultants, they didn't get what I learned through experience.

WN: You said that Jack Hall was not too much into the laws, that he was more organizing workers . . .

RK: Yeah.

WN: In other words, your philosophy was similar to his?

RK: Yeah. Well, you see, if you get a guy that come here and say, "You know, the law says. . . ." Then you going rely on the law. But you cannot win that way, relying on the law. You got to rely on yourself. But Jack Hall was brilliant. Tactical mind. Yeah, he knew his laws, he knew. But one thing, he didn't depend on that too much, you see. Because I know some union officials on this island, they have grievance with a company and they can pay big lawyer with that. Well, the lawyer can't win the grievance. We got to win 'em, okay? (Chuckles) If you bring one lawyer, they can bring five lawyers. You can't win 'em [with lawyers alone].

WN: So did that lead to any kind of split or differences between, say, Jack Hall folks and, say, another?

RK: No, no, no. No, no. I don't think we had, but what I'm pointing out is that, take a guy drowning, okay? He even grab at one straw, right? Here we were in that state that we thought, "Gee, the only way, our only salvation, the only panacea was let the law go after the company," yeah. But, how can, because that judge is appointed by who? (Laughs) We just realized those things, see? And that the important thing is not the law on the book, [it's] the enforcement of that law. You can get 1,000 laws and if not one is enforced, there's no law.

So the federal government tell the company, "Look, you got to pay time and a half after forty hours [a week], and after eight [hours a day]."

If you work more than that you got to get--[If] they don't pay you, who's going after them? That's what I'm talking about. No sense, no enforcement, right? So, eventually, we put that in our agreement. Even if there was a law, we put it in our agreement, time and a half after eight hours, and time and a half after forty hours a week. Because if you go by the law, they work you twenty hours one day. Two days, they tell you stay home the rest of the [week]. Let's say, you stay home the rest of the week, they don't have to pay you time and a half. But in our agreement, anything over eight hours in a day, and a day is twenty-four hours from five to five or six to six, that constitutes premium pay. So you work on Monday twelve hours. That four hours is time and a half, see. And before the week is over, they say you stay home. But that four hour there is premium pay. They cannot put that four hours into that Friday that you did not work, no. So, lot of these things, I would say, muscle power.

WN: What were your feelings toward, say, Jack Hall who's a Mainland Haole, you know, come from the Mainland. What went through your mind?

RK: No. Let me tell you something, see, I had an experience before I got married and this union thing came up. To me, well, okay, I say hatred. My hatred was with the Haoles. Because, let's say this now, when I was going to school, my teachers were practically all Haoles. And the Haoles is the manager's wife or the assistant manager's wife or the head paymaster's wife, was all Haoles. Or the sister-in-law of the manager come here, which I had here, all Haoles. And to me, well, who am I to squawk that they didn't give me the proper education, because I didn't know what was proper education, so what the hell I know about that, right? But as I went to high school, here this Haole wahine, I think, just out of college, young Haole. She's my sophomore English teacher. This is after lunch, okay, one hour English every day. Macbeth and Shakespeare. So one day, we all putting down our head and lying down, rest, sleeping. She picked on me, "Are you asleep?"

So I put my head up--which I was, yeah, after lunch. Uninteresting subject, always on Macbeth, Shakespeare.

So she tell me, "You're not supposed to be sleeping," you know.

So I told her, "Miss," I forget her name, I said, "Miss So-and-so, my father pays seven dollars a month for I come from Koloa to pay for my car fare," 'cause those days no bus, see. And seven dollars, that's one dollar a day those days, now. I'm talking about 1930s. "I didn't come here to study Shakespeare. I came to learn English."

Ho, she started to cry because nobody talk back to her [before], I guess. So she reported me to the principal. And the principal, Fred Frizelle, he [previously] was in Honolulu. I think he was with the YMCA. I was summoned to the principal's office the following day. So I go to his office, you know, kind of nervous, right? And

who . . .

WN: You were nervous?

RK: Of course. (Laughs) Here, fifteen years old, okay?

And so he tell me, "Sit down young man." I sit, you know. "What's your name?" So I tell him my name. Then he ask me, see, this principal, he's all right, he ask me, "By the way, who's going to be the new manager of Kōloa Store?" There was going be one change.

So I said, "Well, I heard that Mr. [Homer] Maxey was going take over," who is the assistant now and that Mr. Maxey was going to be appointed to be manager of Kōloa Store.

He tell me, "You know, you're a brilliant boy," he tell me that. He praise me up, you know. He said, "You know those things. Now, what's the problem with you and this teacher?"

So I told him, "Look, Mr. Frizelle, I come from a plantation family. My parents came from Japan. They can't speak a word of English. They send me to come Kaua'i [High] School to get an education and I think the two most important subjects that I want to learn and I should learn is English and arithmetic."

So he, instead of he scold me, he started to praise me up. He said, "Yeah, yeah."

"But Mr. Frizelle, I don't care about Shakespeare. I don't know what kind of English they using, and here every day, Shakespeare, Shakespeare."

Gee, he agreed with me. I'm bringing this up because I was a rebel at that time already. If I saw injustice or something that I felt was not right, I wasn't afraid to speak up, you know. And that helped me during the union, too, which I told you that I rather have a guy that not much up here (RK points to head) and full of guts. Because you can fill up here, but you no can fill up here (RK points to heart). Guts you no can. Because in the later years, you know when the union started, ho, lot of guys scared, you see. They still had the fear. They still had the fear of the company, the manager, the bosses. And we try our best to eradicate that fear but it's not easy. I don't know, to me, was fear; some guys said, no, that's respect. To me, I said, the hell respect, what (chuckles) the hell, yeah.

So, I guess from young time, you know, high school age, which I not saying that my four years in high school was wasted. I could speak better than the ordinary guy. And when I used to go to the union meeting, at least I knew how to speak up, make a motion, or second the motion, although we didn't get too much lesson in parliamentary procedure in the school, which they should teach, see. But I guess, they didn't want us to know too many things, too. Wanted to keep

[us] ignorant, I guess.

WN: So what about the fact that all your teachers were Haoles. Did that influence you later?

RK: Yeah, so going back to that, during the 1946 strike, that's the first time we struck. We were out seventy-nine days, you know. And when our kids, our kids used to be maybe about eight, nine years old, my oldest used to go to school, you no believe that the same group of teachers were still on the payroll. Da kine plantation official wives and relatives.

They used to tell, send message, "Tell your parents go back work."

Can you beat it? So, oh, my goodness.

WN: You mean, so your kids used to come home with notes?

RK: No, not notes, but say, "Yeah, the teacher said, why [don't] you folks go back work," or something like that, see.

So I used to tell my kids, "Go tell your teacher, mind your own business."

But then, twenty-five years later, the teachers are on the picket line. Of course, different group of teachers, right? And they learned the hard way that the plantation workers were making more money than them.

(Laughter)

RK: They learn the hard way, yeah.

WN: So the fact that Jack Hall was Haole from the Mainland . . .

RK: No, no, no. No, no, no, no.

WN: That's different? That's all . . .

RK: No, you see, we started to differentiate Haoles. And some Haoles, they don't like it today. Local Haoles, they don't--you say, "Ey, you Haole," they don't like it, you see, yeah. But me, see, we live in this cosmopolitan group in Hawai'i, and it's easier for the policeman if there's a suspect, "Ey, that guy look like Japanese," easier. He don't have to go look for one Haole or (chuckles) one Hawaiian, you know. And, so, when they say, "Ey, that guy look like Puerto Rican," that was easier for the police or whoever was trying to identify a person. If you go by nationalities, usually, yeah, it's not discrimination, right? If you say, "Ey, the guys that wen rob the bank was a black guy." Why, he don't have to go look for one white guy or yellow guy, what the hell. So, when we say, "goddamn Haoles," you know, remember Jack Hall, Harry Bridges, [Louis] Goldblatt, they all Haoles. (Chuckles) Yeah, so, we said,

"Ey, from now on, so we no embarrass ourselves or cause some misunderstanding, when we talk about bloody Haoles over here, we [mean] Haole bosses." (Chuckles) Right? Haole bosses. So, to us that was the description of the plantation Haoles, the rulers, was bosses, Haole bosses, yeah.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

RK: In fact, not one of them wear coat or tie.

WN: The union . . .

RK: Leaders, yeah, uh huh.

WN: So you had no animosities towards union Haole guys?

RK: No, no. I don't think we had any. Although, no, when we argue and we get little misunderstanding or hard feeling, we tell you, "Damn Haole," right? Or if him tell, "Ey, you Japanese," eh, right?

WN: Did you folks feel intimidated by the union leaders?

RK: Were we?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Were we intimidated?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Not once. Not once. Warren, remember, another reason why we organize, battle the plantation was because of discrimination, intimidation, coercion, right? And we were not going to let nobody else do that to us. And I don't think that they [union leaders] had any mind [i.e., intimidation was not their intent], yeah, because they were workers themselves. Maybe some of them were intellectuals, they went through UC [University of California at] Berkeley. One of our secretary treasurer had a degree. Well, that was because of his position. You couldn't pick up a longshoreman and tell them keep the books of the union. Impossible, right? But, I'm sure he didn't come from Harvard or Stanford. UC Berkeley okay, huh?

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 15-63-2-87; SIDE ONE

WN: Okay, when did you become president of Kaua'i Local?

RK: Nineteen forty-seven. Right after the '46 strike.

WN: I see. I see. Okay. So you were active in signing up workers or signing up people for the union?

RK: At that time?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah, well . . .

WN: No, before that. I mean, before the strike, '45.

RK: Well, I was mainly for the Kōloa unit, that's all. See, each plantation was a unit, and all the units on this island made the local.

WN: I see. So, all the plantations on the island were being signed up? You only stayed in Kōloa or did you go to other parts of the . . .

RK: You mean, when I started to work for the union?

WN: No, before, when you were helping to sign up workers.

RK: Oh, no, we strictly took care of our plantation, our area. But remember, at that time, there was actually Kīlauea, Līhu'e, Grove Farm, Kōloa, McBryde, Olokele, Waimea, Kekaha. There were eight plantations on this island. Today, only four. [Actually, five sugar plantations are in operation on Kaua'i today: Līhu'e Plantation Co., Kekaha Sugar Co., McBryde Sugar Co., Olokele Sugar Co., and Gay & Robinson, Inc.]

WN: And of those eight, which ones were Amfac?

RK: Līhu'e, Grove Farm, Kōloa, Kekaha. Four of the eight.

WN: Four of the eight were Amfac . . .

RK: And Līhu'e and Kekaha were the two biggest.

WN: Okay. When you were signing up people, you had to go to not only Japanese, but you had to go to Filipinos, too? Was that a different kind of problem to approach a Filipino worker?

RK: Yes, because, to begin with, language. You see, at that time, most of the Filipinos working for the plantation were old-time Filipinos. So they couldn't speak too good English. More Filipino, yeah. And now, if you going to say Filipino language, there's Visayan and Ilocano, and I'm sure there must have been some Tagalog, and all that. Within that [Filipino] group, we had about two or three different dialects. If you were confronted with the Japanese group, the alien Japanese group, that's only one language, right? And not much other nationality, that's all. English-speaking, the Filipinos-speaking, and the Japanese-speaking. So when we had meeting we always segregated into three different groups and had

three different speakers explain and answer questions. And I was assigned the Japanese group.

WN: So you spoke pretty-good Japanese?

RK: Well, you see, we didn't have parents already, so we were out of practice. Nobody to talk Japanese to, you see. But then, if you go to the minister or some scholarly Japanese and learn certain words, you could interpret the agreement or the issues. Not too hard because we know basic Japanese, right? It's only a matter of inserting certain words. Let's say now, how we going to say arbitration in Japanese, right? So you go and ask the minister, what's that, yeah. And even, how you going say communist in Japanese, you know. So that you can speak not fluent Japanese, but plantation pidgin Japanese. They understand. Because the people here were the--lot of isseis, yet, were working on the plantation, and most of the isseis were craftsmen. Carpenters or masons, and they could speak pidgin already, yeah. They could speak pidgin already.

WN: Okay. When you were first organizing, you know, you were working motor pool then?

RK: Right.

WN: How were the relations with your bosses?

RK: Very bad. See, the manager that we had was dictatorial. Bully, yeah.

WN: You mean the [Kōloa] Plantation manager or the motor pool . . .

RK: Plantation manager. The motor pool foremen, they were the local people. Oh, they were all right, yeah, because we were strong. But if we were weak, they would have kicked us around, right. So I guess, what I used to tell the workers, "Look, we ought to be thankful we got one manager like this, that's why we tough."

WN: We're talking about Hector Moir?

RK: Yeah. Although he had his way of running the plantation, right? Because it's a funny thing, from plantation to plantation, different. At Kekaha, they had a good relation with the manager. During the [1946] strike, the plantation loaned them tractors for go and clean and plow the land for they raise strike garden. And take a place like Lihu'e, ho, it was a battle. Kōloa, the same thing. So, I don't know where the--they didn't have the same policy. McBryde was good, yeah, McBryde was good.

WN: "Good" meaning that the manager and the union could work together . . .

RK: Yes. Yeah. We talking about while we were--during the economic

warfare, strike. Yet, certain plantations, the managers were very nice. Cooperated with the union. I don't know. So when the management was cold-blooded, the union became tough, too. There was no choice. You got to fight fire with fire, right?

WN: So what were the issues going into the '46 strike? What were the major issues?

RK: Well, strictly, wages. The low pay was so low and this conversion of perquisite to cash. See, we were trying to get out of this plantation paternalistic scheme of running their plantation. "Oh, we take care you from your birth, and medical, then we house you, and we give you job, and we give you fuel and," oh, my goodness, yeah.

So we wanted to get out of that paternalism. So one of our demands was, convert that perquisite to cash. In other words, if you say we worth eight cents [an hour], well, give us the eight cents and we pay you for the rent. So the housing, the rental schedule, was part of the agreement. Certain type of house, not more than ten dollars, not more than twelve dollars, depending on the condition. A, B, C, and type of structure. Plus the square feet of the size of the house. Oh, my goodness, ten-dollar house. (Chuckles)

WN: Were there some workers who said, "Hey, you know, the perquisites are good, let's keep it."

RK: No.

WN: No?

RK: No. The reason is this, during those years, [when there was] no union--of course the supervisors, office workers had the better homes, better locations, no argument. Better job. They used to go work with white shirt and tie. And the other workers, they had more lousy house. And if you say more lousy house, that means you had less water pressure, lot of things involved in that. Your road was not paved, dust. But, during that period, it's not only the job you did, but if you were liked by the manager, you had a better house than the other guy. But then, if you were getting a better house, they should have deducted more from you than me if I was living in a one-by-twelve house. Don't you think so? So, the strike ended that kind of favoritism and discrimination. If you were living in a better home, you pay more, which is right. Then the guy that living in the lousy house was not subsidizing the guy that living in the good house.

WN: You said wages was the main thing? Was it . . .

RK: Well, wages and . . .

WN: . . . also recognition?

RK: Well, we were recognized, yeah.

WN: I mean, you know, what, just the fact that if you struck and got what you wanted, people would stand up and say, "Hey, you know, the union is something . . ."

RK: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh . . .

WN: That's what I mean by "recognition."

RK: Oh, yeah, yeah. You mean, recognition from the . . .

WN: Respect.

RK: . . . yeah, respect, recognition, respect, yeah. I guess so . . .

WN: Because, see, people say that the '46 strike, you know, economically, it wasn't that successful. But what was successful about that first strike was the fact that it made people stand up and take the union seriously.

RK: Yeah.

WN: Do you agree with that?

RK: Here, first time in over 100 years of the sugar industry existence, over 100 years, one organization stood up and took 'em on, the sugar industry, and kicked their butts, okay? And that was mainly because the strike was well organized. It was strictly on, what should I say? All past strikes was on racial line. This was on non-racial line. Every nationality was in one union, and we struck together, and I guess that's why that strike was successful. And also, that the public sympathy was with the strikers, which is very important. You need public support. So, also, during '46, oh, politically, we were coming up, we were gathering strength politically, too. So the politicians knew which side of the bread was buttered already. They were coming to us more than they were going to the other side. More so the Democrats. And I guess, that's the first time we--that was close, we had a tie in the house of representatives. We had, I don't know how many--fifteen-fifteen tie or something. Anyway we got a tie and one Democrat from this island sold out. He was the Judas. So the Republicans controlled for the two years, they controlled the state house. But don't worry because the following election, we controlled the--for the first time--the Democrats controlled the house and the senate, I guess. Although we were still having appointed governor, but regardless of who was appointed, Republican or Democrat for the governor, Hawai'i, he acted like a Republican anyway, you know.

WN: Let's stop over here, okay, then try one more time continue on with the '46 strike.

RK: Oh, next time?

WN: When I come back.

RK: Yeah. You ask me anything about the '46 strike.

WN: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 15-67-3-87

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Robert Kunimura (RK)

December 8, 1987

Kōloa, Kaua'i

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Kunimura on December 8, 1987 in Kōloa. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay Bob, last time, we were talking about the '46 strike. What led up to the strike? Why did you folks strike?

RK: Well, I guess it was more wages and the working conditions. Low wages on the plantation, lousy working conditions. No vacations, no holidays, yeah. How can you justify that on Labor Day, the national holiday, the only guys that were working that day was the workingman, plantation working guys. School kids were not working Labor Day, and yet the plantation man was working on Labor Day. So, those things all included, yeah. No vacation.

WN: What did you folks have to do to prepare for the strike?

RK: Well, this was the first time that we ever struck, and when I say that, I mean for most of the workers, they never know--didn't go out on strike [before].

WN: So agriculture workers, too?

RK: Oh, everybody.

WN: This is after the Little Wagner Act . . .

RK: That's right, yeah. Because [by] 1946, everybody was recognized already. And we were bargaining for the entire plantation. And this is the first time that we struck as one, the whole plantation, the whole industry was. There was no union along racial lines, it was all one union. Yeah, everybody. So, it was a pretty solid strike, 1946. Seventy-nine-day strike. And important thing is that we won lot of the demands, right? We couldn't win everything, but we got a good settlement for a beginning.

WN: What percent of the rank and file you think went out?

RK: Oh, it was---let's put it this way, the entire industry was tied up so it was a 100 percent strike. Nobody worked, yeah, nobody worked. No smoke came out of the smokestack, no sugar was manufactured.

WN: You told me that Kōloa played a big role in the strike.

RK: Well, what I mean to say is that the strikers from Kōloa, I guess they were more militant than other plantations. You see, the manager was real strict, so the workers were more united. Whereas on some plantations, the company loaned them tractors for plow the strike garden. So, naturally, on plantations like that, the workers are not going to be militant. They don't have to be militant. But in Kōloa, we had a bad time with the manager, so, naturally.

WN: So you think if the manager was more easygoing and accommodating, you folks wouldn't have been as militant?

RK: I guess so. Because after all, we were just as human as the strikers on the next plantation. So, I guess some plantations, they took the hard-boiled role, and I guess, yeah; and some much easier, depending on the manager. You know at that time, there were lot of managers that were still on the high horse. Let's put it this way, to them maybe it was a battle for prerogative. They thought that they had practically all the prerogative and that the workers had to listen to what they had to say.

WN: You folks had . . .

RK: And as workers we felt that, well, we have to get some rights, too, see.

WN: You folks had problems with scab labor?

RK: Hardly any.

WN: The management didn't try bring in scabs?

RK: No, no. No, no, no attempt whatsoever. Yeah, no attempt whatsoever. I guess that's because they knew that the workers were really unified, yeah; that they were too solid. So, they didn't fool around with any scab. And I'm sure if they had attempted to do that, they would have had lot of problems.

WN: You said Kōloa was, you know, really unified. Were there other plantations that were not as unified and, you know, posed a threat to . . .

RK: I guess everywhere they were all equally unified, but maybe the degree of militancy, maybe they had more in certain place than the other place.

WN: Oh, what you mean by militancy? What . . .

RK: Well, that they were more aggressive than other units on Kaua'i, I'm sure. I'm sure of that, yeah.

WN: Who was the leader of Kōloa's unit?

RK: Oh, I was one of them. I was the president of the unit.

WN: Who was vice president?

RK: Oh, I can't recall. I can't recall. We had first vice president, second vice president. [Nineteen] forty-six, you know, that's pretty--forty years ago, forty-one years ago, I think.

WN: Do you think maybe lot of the militancy in Kōloa was because you were president? (Laughs)

RK: No, I won't say that. I wouldn't say that, but that the company forced us to be militant because the management was so autocratic, so bullish, let's say, that we were forced to be militant. Otherwise we couldn't survive.

WN: Were there any open confrontations?

RK: Oh, plenty, plenty. But we just disregard it. We told management, "Look, don't try to give us orders because we not working for you, we on strike, so you not our boss anymore. During this period we our own boss. We're going run our thing the way we want to."

WN: Who were some of the leaders of the strike who were calling the shots? Who did you report to?

RK: The setup was that on the lowest level, that was the unit strike strategy committee, and each plantation had that committee. And then the next highest body was the island strike strategy committee, that's the one that was the top body of this island. And the highest body of the strike was the territorial strike strategy committee, that was in Honolulu. But on each higher committee, the units or the island was represented. That was the setup of the strike. Because the fact that this was just like economic warfare with the industry, we had to maintain strict discipline. So the strike machinery was well established. It ran smoothly. Yeah, it ran smoothly.

WN: What did you folks do with people who felt they wanted to go back to work?

RK: Well, not too much problem with that because the company or the industry didn't try to force them back to work because they knew that we were too well organized and that practically everybody was on strike. So even if they attempted to make us back to work movement, there would be hardly anybody to follow that program. So they didn't even attempt to do that. They felt that two-and-a-half months, I guess they tried us out. I guess they tried us out, yeah.

'Cause usually, every year, the plantation go off two-and-a-half months anyway. Harvesting is all through, so. I guess at that time, I think the contract expired [August 31, 1946], and I think we went on strike [September 1] to November [18]. Normally, that is the period when the plantations were through with their harvesting.

WN: Oh, I see. Well, how come you folks chose that time to strike, then? Usually you would strike at a . . .

RK: Well, because of the fact that that's when our contract expired, [August 31]. And I guess we didn't know any better that we could have prolonged the period of no contract and then struck later, but I guess we were not experienced enough to know that, what we know today. Then we could have waited for a more opportune time. But in the subsequent negotiation, we got the agreement to expire at a later date, January 31.

WN: Is that more of a peak sugar . . .

RK: Well, that will be more advantageous to us than a September 30 date of expiration.

WN: Oh, I see.

RK: But remember now, the date of expiration is part of the agreement, part of the contract demand, and so you have to be strong enough to make that change. See, the industry won't change the date easily, yeah. So you had to bargain hard and win the--even the contract expiration date was a very important demand of the union.

WN: Of '46 strike?

RK: Well, yeah. Forty-six strike, well, we had no choice that the contract says September 30, expiration. But later on when the union became more experienced, more tough, we got the expiration date changed to January 31.

WN: I see. So traditionally, November, September, October, those are slow months.

RK: Oh, that's the months that the plantation usually shut down, close down.

WN: Plus, so, the managers must have known that, yeah?

RK: Well, let me tell you this, they said that it take two to have a fight. When you talk about economic warfare, strike, okay, the industry knows going to be a strike. Sure, the work, the union going to prepare because we know what kind of an employer we working for, see. But what I mean to say is that if the companies don't want the strike, okay, they can make accommodations and bargain honestly with the union. But you see, most guys believe that, oh, because of the union there's [going to be] a strike. Nobody wants

to strike. Nobody wants to strike. And at that time because the union was still weaker than the industry, it [union] said, "Okay, let's have arbitration."

Oh, they [company] yell, "No, we don't want arbitration."

Know what their excuse is? That if you had a bicycle, you wanted to sell a bicycle, a secondhand bicycle, you not going ask your neighbor to set the price of that bicycle. That's the kind of an argument they used, you see. But arbitration is the right way. But if you stronger [than the opposition], you don't want arbitration. And can you believe that in the later years, the industry was yelling for arbitration and the union said to hell, we don't want arbitrate. (Chuckles) Using the same argument that you guys used against arbitration when you was stronger. So we had big argument with the president of the union, Harry Bridges. He recommended that we arbitrate.

But we told him that, "Why should we arbitrate, we are tough enough. Let's flex our muscle." They used up their muscle on us, you see.

So, on that issue, Jack Hall was with us. He agreed with us, yeah.

WN: This is later on, though?

RK: Yeah, later. Oh yeah, much later on.

WN: But in the '46 strike time, it was unanimous within the union for arbitration?

RK: Oh, sure.

WN: You folks knew you were going to win out to arbitration?

RK: Well, we felt that that was a easier way than striking. 'Cause strike is no picnic. It doesn't involve just the worker, right? Involve families, kids, dependent relatives, and all that involved. And not only that, but then the community is involved. And it's not an easy thing.

WN: Well let's talk about that. You had how many kids at that time?

RK: Five.

WN: Five kids.

RK: Yeah. Five kids.

WN: Okay, what went through your mind when you thinking, okay, are we going to strike now? I mean, you probably had more kids than most of the strikers, right?

RK: Well, yeah, on the average I had more, yeah. But the thing is this,

as far as I was concerned, it was not a matter of money. I felt that the workers on the plantation should receive their due respect and dignity as workingmen of this state [i.e., territory]. So I felt that the only way to obtain that was to get it ourselves. We couldn't depend on the law, we couldn't depend on the minister of the church, we couldn't depend on nobody but ourselves, right? So, I felt that this is a battle that we just have to win. Just to elevate ourselves, to make us at least equal with the other workers of this territory.

WN: How did you prepare your family for this? Did your wife work at all?

RK: No. At that time my wife was not working. But seventy-nine days, well, you got to minus Saturday, Sunday off, right? So actually, I don't know how many working days, but we were broke already, so you can't be more broke than broke. And the union helped all the workers. We had enough food, we had enough. Well, at least we made sure we don't pay the rent because at that time there was no set rent. That was all a package involving the eight cents an hour deducted from your pay, hourly pay, for perquisite, yeah, so. Medical, there was no medical fee a month or water or fuel or rent. We didn't have pork chop every night, but no worry, we had our rice and da kine, okazu.

WN: What about food? How did you folks manage with food during the strike?

RK: Oh, no. In that 1946 strike, we didn't establish any soup kitchen.

WN: Really?

RK: Yeah. We just cook at home. And whoever had hard time, we used to give them rice and whatever necessity.

WN: So you only went with what you had before the strike to keep you going?

RK: Right. Yeah. Correct.

WN: What about the stores, did they donate anything?

RK: Oh. Yeah. Plus the fact that the--see, we made a big mistake because the plantation had the store here. We shouldn't have struck the [Koloa] Plantation Store. We should have left it open.

WN: Oh, you struck the store?

RK: Yeah. Well, that's one mistake we made. (Chuckles) So we should have left the store open and we keep on charging, right? And they can't deduct from our pay because we got no pay. But the other stores, the independent stores, gave us credit. Yeah, gave us credit. But 1946, I guess it still was under the OPA [Office of

Price Administration], the price control, yeah, was still there. So you could buy akule for twenty-five cents a pound. Not like today, about three dollars a pound. At that time because of the price regulation control, akule was only twenty-five cents a pound. That, I still can't forget, yeah. And aku, the tuna boat used to park in Kaua'i and they used to unload their catch for the strikers, ten cents a pound. Yeah, aku, ten cents a pound. Because the tuna cannery [i.e., Hawaiian Tuna Packers in Honolulu] was organized, too. You know, they were ILWU, right, yeah, tuna over here. And I guess workers at that time didn't have mortgage payment, there was all plantation houses. Hardly anybody bought their own home. And I guess whatever place that you owed money, let's say credit union, they said, "Oh, just pay the interest. You don't have to pay the principal." So we got pretty good accommodation from outside . . .

WN: Community.

RK: Yeah, people right here. Business firms.

WN: Did the banks lend any money during the strike?

RK: Well, to begin with, at that time, we don't know what the inside of a bank was. We didn't have even the opportunity to go into the bank. And, I guess credit union was already operating, credit union, yeah, so. No, no, no, no. There's no such thing as bank would lend us money. In fact, we had no business to be in the bank. And the unions, each unit had their own strike fund. So, we helped those that needed the help. Although we couldn't pay their personal loans, personal IOUs, but we made sure that nobody starved. We couldn't help a guy who had a note on his Cadillac. But anyway, we managed all right.

WN: Where were the pickets set up?

RK: The first morning [of the strike], we picketed, and I guess after that there was hardly any picketing. Because hardly anybody went to work, so nobody pass through the picket line. So no sense picket. What you going picket, the air? No sense. We said, "Oh, why we got up early for go picket?" Suspend all picketing. And we concentrated more on strike garden, hunting, fishing, and sports program for keep the strikers active. For morale, at night we had a program, oh, we had all kind. And we got pretty good public support, yeah. The public was really backing us up.

WN: So in the beginning, you didn't picket, but later on, did you picket?

RK: No, no. No, no, no picketing.

WN: Not at all?

RK: Not at all, yeah. Nothing to picket, yeah, nothing to picket. That's one thing with the plantation, a sugar worker strike, maybe

you set up an informational picket line a few days after the strike [begins] and that's all. There's nothing else after that.

WN: So at no time did you get any problems from the non-plantation people in Kōloa?

RK: No. No, no, no. Nothing, nothing.

WN: So, in terms of like gardens, everybody had gardens or you had central gardens?

RK: Yeah, to begin with, this is part of the plantation life. 'Cause land was available and each home had pretty good-size lot, so most of the workers had their own home garden. So during the strike, what we had or we added to that. We got empty lots here and there. We go there, dig 'em up, and plant vegetable. Water was free. And--oh, pretty good. Pretty good vacation. We had pretty good vacation.

WN: Did the women have any kind of auxiliary or anything like that?

RK: That's right. The wives and the women's auxiliary pick their own officers and they had their activity. Of course, we had to keep the morale up too, the wives, yeah.

So, course, after the '46 strike, we had another big strike, you see.

WN: [Nineteen] fifty-eight, yeah?

RK: [Nineteen] fifty-eight. Well, that's when the wives had to take more active part because we had soup kitchen to feed all the strikers. So, wives had to come in and help cook. That was a big strike. Hundred and twenty-six, twenty-five days strike. [The strike lasted 128 days.]

WN: Okay, I going ask you about that little later. During the '46 strike you said had hunting, too?

RK: Yeah.

WN: But was an organized thing?

RK: Yeah, organized thing. In fact, the boys went out for pig hunting and goat hunting.

WN: What did you feel you gained from the '46 strike?

RK: Well, one thing is that we cut off the paternalism that existed prior to the strike and that one of the settlements of the '46 strike was conversion of perquisites to cash. That there were not going to be any more free house, free medical, free fuel, free water on the plantation. All that was converted and given to each worker

into his wages. So the minimum pay on the plantation after the '46 strike, the minimum was seventy-eight cents an hour or something.

WN: As opposed to--what was it before the strike?

RK: Oh, before the strike it was the federal minimum, forty. But minus eight cents for [perquisites]--not even thirty-two cents.

WN: Thirty-two cents an hour?

RK: Or something like that, uh huh. And the fact that the union was here to stay. At least we took them on, we battled them for seventy-nine days, and we came out victorious. We didn't get everything what we asked for, but union went out and came back in one piece, solid, yeah. And I guess, showed the people, the public, that this union is here to stay. Because all prior strikes in the sugar industry, all was lost, the workers lost, right? This was one victorious strike of the workers, yeah.

WN: I'm wondering, you know, right about that time, they had the last bunch of Filipino workers coming in, huh, from Ilocos?

RK: Yeah.

WN: I was wondering, how did you get them to join the union?

RK: Well, these workers came in in the early part of 1946 [beginning in January 1946, HSPA recruited 6,000 men, 446 women, and 915 children from the Philippines to Hawai'i], and it was easier to assimilate these workers. Now 6,000, you sprinkle this on all the plantations and I guess at that time there were about twenty-six plantations [in the territory], so each plantation got a pro rata amount of these newcomers, I don't know on what percentage basis, but not too many on each plantation. Of course, on the bigger plantations there were more. But easier to assimilate because they [Ilocanos] could speak English. And I guess the plantation felt that, oh, if they should bring 'em in 1946, knowing that they were going to force us to strike that year, that there might be this group of 6,000 workers that were not economically prepared for the strike. Also, they felt that because of the occupation of Philippines by the Japanese army, World War II, that there might still be some hard feelings [toward the Japanese workers], something like that. And, maybe other reasons, but the two reasons that I mentioned did not materialize because they came here and we helped them out, the newcomers. The fact that we had plenty of the old-time Filipino workers still on the plantation which relate to them and that don't have any suspicion on the Japanese here. They not like the [Japanese] soldiers that invaded the Philippines, see, so, we didn't have any racial problems.

What the plantation counted on did not materialize. In fact, they took very active part with us because of the fact that these 6,000 were younger and, I guess, they were more educated. They could

speak--because I still remember the old Filipino workers that used to come here work. They couldn't speak English even, yeah. Not so with this 6,000. A lot of them came as family, wife and children, so. Oh yeah, they helped plenty, yeah, they help us plenty.

WN: So after the strike, you know, elimination of the perquisites, so people then, suddenly had to pay for their house, right, or to buy their house?

RK: Right.

WN: Was that any problem to some workers?

RK: No. There was no problem because we already got--you see, let's say, if you were one of those lucky ones that by one reason or the other had a good house to live in, you know, because the plantation because of their favoritism, some guys got nicer homes than others. Well, the conversion was based on, if your rental at that time was thirty dollars a month, then you got fifteen cents an hour or something like that. And if my house was ten dollars a month, I got only five cents an hour more than you because you got a nicer home. See, there was no problem because the guy that had a nicer home, better home, he got a bigger increase so that he could pay for his home. Otherwise, what the sense of getting an increase if you had to pay 'em back in rental? So the conversion was very equitably done so that there wouldn't be hardship on the workers.

WN: What about in your case, what did you do?

RK: My case? Well, I was living not the first-class house nor one of the worse, so I was living more or less, oh, about eighteen dollars a month house, yeah. See, the condition of the house plus the size of the house determined the rental of that house. So, okay, that was no problem. Yeah, that's no problem.

WN: So you went back to work after the strike, was there a different attitude between the workers and the management? Did you sense that?

RK: Well, you see, I came from the plantation where there was real bad blood flowing during the strike and I have to say that that was because of management and not the union. So, naturally, when we go back to work, it was just as intense and also the management knew that they were going to merge--Grove Farm was going to take over [Koloa Plantation in 1948].

WN: Oh, they knew before the strike?

RK: Of course, they knew. That was already all arranged, yeah. So, naturally, they were playing hardball. But I was already elected [in 1947] to be the president of this local, this island was a local. So, after the strike, instead of back to my former job [RK took a leave of absence], I went to assume the full-time position

with the union. There were two full-time workers assigned to this island and I was one of them.

WN: Immediately after the strike?

RK: Yeah, that's right. [Nineteen] forty-seven, I was already working for the union. That is, we had islandwide voting and I was picked to be the head of this island.

WN: You replace somebody?

RK: No, no. It's just a new setup, yeah.

WN: Oh. So you were president of . . .

RK: This local here.

WN: Kaua'i Local?

RK: Yeah, Kaua'i was 149, Local 149.

WN: Who were the other officers, do you remember?

RK: Oh. I was the president, and Yoshikazu Morimoto was the secretary-treasurer, only two of us. And so we had a office rented in Līhu'e. Of course, under our local it's not only the sugar but pineapple workers were under our jurisdiction here.

WN: Oh, so was the cannery striking, too, at the same time?

RK: No, no, no, no. Cannery was one year later, '47.

WN: Okay. What about like longshoremen, did they go out in sympathy or anything?

RK: No. You see, that's another mistake or that's another cute maneuver of the industry. When they put us in that situation, when they forced the longshoremen to strike in 1946 while we were on strike, to submit us to starvation, no boat came in.

WN: The longshoremen went out on strike?

RK: Yes. They were forced to strike, too.

WN: Same time?

RK: Yeah. And so where was the . . .

WN: Rice?

RK: Rice. I'm sure that the Big Five had all this figured out, so, there was a short supply of rice in the state [territory] already, to begin with. They controlled the shipping. They were the big

wholesalers. There was no Foodland. There was no Safeway, Star Market, Times Market, there were no independent grocery outfit at that time. Was strictly American Factors, Alexander & Baldwin, [Theo H.] Davies. The beginning, all they put . . .

WN: They supplied all the small stores?

RK: Well, they were the wholesalers, to begin with. Plus, most of the plantation, they had their retail . . .

WN: Yeah, the stores.

RK: . . . outlets.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

RK: That's a kind of tight ship they were operating here in the state [territory]. And as I said, depending on what plantation doctor you went to. See, if you went to one American Factors plantation doctor, he recommend Carnation milk for your child. But if you went to one Alexander & Baldwin plantation doctor, he said, oh, feed your baby Alpine milk because they were the distributors for the Alpine milk in the territory. American Factors was the distributor for the Carnation milk here. Plus, even the beer that you drank, yeah. I recall that when the Kōloa Sugar Company, in 1933, celebrated the 100th year anniversary.

WN: Nineteen thirty-five.

RK: Nineteen thirty. . . .

WN: Thirty-five.

RK: Well, the celebration was in '33. Because I happened to graduate that year and I helped with that luau over here. Was in '33, yeah, okay. So they had big luau with the--I don't know, they said there was 5,000 or 8,000 laulau inside the imu. They had a crane for help put that in. You know, big wire net, you know. And--of course, free, everything free. But on the luau table, what brand of beer do you think we had?

WN: I don't know.

RK: Lucky Lager. Because Amfac was the distributor for Lucky Lager in the territory at that time. I just mention this to reveal what was going on in the plantation. It's not only talking about work, you know, but what you eat, what you wore, or what kind of a transportation you was riding in those days, yeah. I know gasoline, you can't fill up Shell Oil or Union 76. There was no such station

over here. Standard Oil. This whole island was all Standard Oil product. Then, I'm sure Mr. [Charlie] Rice brought Shell Oil to this island. From there we had competition, at least you didn't have to fill Standard in your car, right? And I'm sure, with that kind of a monopoly, they were sure fixing prices. Right?

I recall they didn't even like Kress Store to come on this island. The plantation wouldn't sell, lease, or rent them their area for Kress Store to come in. Lucky thing Charlie Rice sold that property where the Kress Store is on Kaua'i. So that's how Kress Store came up on this island. [Previously] you had to go to Lihue Store, which is American Factors outlet. No independent store could come here. And the plantation even--not all, but certain plantations told the independent store owners that if you sell your rice--and those days rice used to come in 100-pound sacks--if you sell your rice for less than fifteen dollars a bag, then you were not going to get permission to enter plantation camps for soliciting. Can you beat that?

So, one of the independent merchants on this island, H. S. Kawakami, that's the man responsible for the Big Save [Value Centers], yeah. When I was working for the union, he came to show me this letter written by Mr. Carter, manager of Olokele Sugar Company. And the letter stated that, we would like you to agree to sell rice for not less than fifteen dollars a bag, or something. So he [Kawakami] came to see me, and he said if I can help him out. I said, "Yeah. Give me that letter." So I immediately sent that letter to our union lawyers. We already had union lawyers in Honolulu, and I sent them a copy of that letter.

Because Olokele was under C. Brewer, our lawyers threatened them with antitrust violation. Conspiring to fix price, yeah. And so, they withdrew right away. That's the kind thing that was going on before. And who going to get hurt? The workers. Because if Mr. Kawakami wanted to come and sell you for \$13.50 who was going save? The workers, right? But that's the way things were being run around here. And most of the plantations had the upper hand because the plantation stores gave you credit, and that if end of the month you owed twenty dollars, they deducted that from your paycheck. So the independent stores couldn't compete. So let's say they deducted twenty dollars from my paycheck, and I get only ten dollar more remaining. Now, I got to pay for other things, but the poor store in Hanapepe town, okay, couldn't collect all from me 'cause I didn't have enough money to pay him, right? That's the way it was going. But the plantation stores had the first whack at my paycheck. Just as bad as the Internal Revenue [Service], you know. (Chuckles) Before I see my money, it was already in their. . . . (Chuckles) I guess the Internal Revenue learn from the plantation over here, pay as you go, withholding.

(Laughter)

WN: So, since the longshoremen were striking, too, then if the strike

went on further you folks would've been suffering 'cause you wouldn't have gotten . . .

RK: Well, no, no. No. I think who suffered plenty, because of the rice shortage, in this Hawaiian Islands was more the restaurants on Maunakea Street, the Chinese restaurants. (Chuckles) Because without rice, how can they operate their restaurants, right? Because we could always live--we not working so what the hell, we can eat bread, right, cracker. (Chuckles)

WN: I was reading a--it was a Jack Hall book, A Spark is Struck! The Haole strike leaders in Honolulu ordered rice from the Mainland, and instead of white rice they sent brown rice. You heard about that?

RK: Yeah. That's right. And not only that, but Louisiana long rice, too.

WN: Oh, yeah?

RK: (Laughs) Yeah.

WN: Long grain . . .

RK: Yeah. So, we had some long rice. So that the wives grumble, huh, "Ho, that kind rice cannot eat."

We said to 'em, "Mix 'em half-and-half, what the hell." (Chuckles)

WN: This is long grain rice? Not long rice?

RK: Long grain. Yeah, not long rice. Long grain rice. Louisiana long grain rice. Was good. But only thing is that don't make it all one time, right? Mix 'em up. Yeah. Even the brown rice, you mix 'em up, what the difference? Well, I tell them, "If you hungry, you eat, don't worry."

But then, remember now, see, when there's plenty rice, lot of waste, right? When the rice supply go down--one thing that the strike taught us was not to waste. That was a big lesson we learned. See, the wives thought that, oh, get leftover rice, you can always feed 'em to the chickens or the ducks or the dogs. Because every family used to keep their own chickens. You couldn't buy chicken wing or chicken thigh like today. You want to eat chicken, you raise your own chicken. Yeah, that was the days. You want egg, you raise your own chicken for your eggs. That's the way it was before, yeah. So why feed them extra rice which cost you maybe five dollars a 100-pound bag, where you could buy chicken feed for \$2.50, right? Feed was always cheaper.

So, that strike taught us, look, don't waste. And not only that but the families got closer together, too, because of the strike. Because they found out that they were fighting the same people.

WN: So when you were president from '47, how long were you president?

RK: Oh, maybe about three years, uh huh, three years [1947-50]. Then we had a territorial change. Instead of each island, one local, we consolidated. We had one local for the whole state [territory]. So there was some change in structure.

WN: But where did that leave you?

RK: Well, I still worked for the union. Under the new local.

WN: What was your new title?

RK: Oh, I was the business agent.

WN: Oh, business agent. So, soon after you became president, Kōloa Sugar merged with Grove Farm, huh?

RK: Right.

WN: How did that affect the workers at all?

RK: Well, because at that time we didn't have a good provision for severance pay. The company had their own policy. What you call, aloha bonus or something. So, we know for certain, and I was one of them, too, that got a letter from the company, Grove Farm Company, yeah, that according to service with the company, Kōloa Sugar Company, that I was entitled to so many dollars which, I guess, amounted to about 3[00]-400 dollars, which was a big amount in those days, '47. And that I was entitled to that, see, severance pay. And that if I collected that, that was up. Pau.

WN: You were how old?

RK: Oh, at that time?

WN: You were only about thirty- . . .

RK: At that time? Let's say 1947, '47 . . .

WN: About thirty-three years?

RK: Oh, thirty-something. Yeah, yeah. But we---and Jack Hall came to this island to address that problem with the workers here. And at that meeting, we advised the workers who received that . . .

WN: Severance . . .

RK: . . . notice, yeah, not to accept it, to hang on. But most of the workers, greed or something, they went and go pick up that severance pay, which was small amount. But, once you collect that, that was your agreement for termination with the company. And as hard as we tried to advise them not to pick up that severance pay, most of the

workers did. About a dozen of us who did not go and pick up that severance pay, we were all reinstated to the company. About twelve of us. And, well, that's the first time that we came across such a thing as company merging, and all that.

WN: Plus . . .

RK: And they picked the militant workers, union guys in that group. Yeah, I know, we know that.

WN: So with merger came a new management, yeah?

RK: Yeah, yeah.

WN: How did that affect you folks?

RK: Well, you see, the dominant company was Grove Farm Company, not Kōloa Sugar.

WN: So not Amfac [American Factors] anymore?

RK: No. Grove Farm was still affiliated with Amfac. So as far as Big Five tie-in, it didn't affect any. It was still same, yeah. But it happened that the Grove Farm manager, at that time was William P. Alexander. He was a nice man. Yeah. Very nice man. So, only thing that he advised--he didn't advise the Kōloa officials, but he advised the Grove Farm officials, don't let the Kōloa boys take over. What I mean is that (chuckles) they knew what kind of a militant group we had in Kōloa, see. And I was working for the union, so what I did the first thing when this merger took place, was that the union had a meeting to counter the plantation. Because the plantation became one. So the units had to be one, too. We couldn't have Kōloa unit and Grove Farm unit, yeah. So, what we did, I got the guys together and--not because we wanted to appease the manager. I told the Kōloa leaders that, let's put the Grove Farm unit chairman, let's put him unit chairman. As long as we control the board. (WN laughs.) So, well, my thinking at the time was to lull them to sleep little. That they must have felt good to see that the Grove Farm official became the president of the new unit. And we did that, yeah, we did that. But that was more window dressing on our part because we controlled everything. So, I always felt, see, that we should try and be one step ahead of the opponent. That's what we had felt, see. And then when we heard that the general manager of Grove Farm advised the Grove Farm unit, don't let the Kōloa boys take over, you see, I laugh to myself, I said, "Oh, we'll pull one on him."

(Laughter)

RK: Yeah. What I felt at that time was that because we put the Grove Farm official as president of the unit, that the manager must have took out his Christmas cigar, open that box, and smoke the cigar, and say, "Gee, after all, they listen to me." Well, little did he

realize that we had the board controlled. But was that two different types of management, yeah. Grove Farm. . . . I guess, they didn't even carry a stick, the management. Kōloa Sugar, boy, that manager had a big stick with him. Tried to intimidate. Oh, two different types of management, yeah. And so, the Grove Farm workers were more conservative, I guess. But, remember now, we all same, we all same, right, workers. And they didn't get any better pay than we got because the Big Five had a terrific union paying the same wages on all the plantations. Without contract. Must have been one big conspiracy, right? (Laughs) Yeah. But it was interesting sometimes to outsmart them, too. They been outsmarting us all their life, what the hell.

WN: What about allegations that the union had communists in it?

RK: Well, this was about 1950, early 1950s, or late 1940s when the whole country--and I guess that was all postwar period, they went through this, yeah. And this Second World War was no different. It was a big scare. And I guess, yet--you should know this, too, that they even tainted Roosevelt as being communist or pro-communist, that's why he gave in so much to Stalin at Yalta. Well, that's politics, okay, that's politics. But then, in America, "Jumping" Joe McCarthy was riding high and mighty and handsome in the Senate. This was a senator from a conservative state. I think Wis . . .

WN: Wisconsin.

RK: And that McCarthyism sickness came to this islands, too, yeah. And the industry felt that, boy, that's one way, it's a cheap way, to attack the union. Brand them as communist. So, funny thing, on this island my brother--the mayor, now--got branded as communist before I got.

WN: What was he doing at the time?

RK: Well, you see, Tony was working for the ILWU because he was working for Love's Bakery. Love's Bakery decided to branch out to Kaua'i. And I don't know, somehow, somewhere along the line--you see, I was a very good friend with this former stevedore official, [Ichiro] Izuka. And this is [during] the '46 strike. Izuka was a staunch Democrat--he was supporting [William] Borthwick for delegate to Congress. And, let's see, our union was supporting . . .

WN: Farrington?

RK: Joseph Farrington, okay. Republican. And we had a big argument. We had a big split because like Kaua'i, we felt that the only good Republican was a dead Republican, yeah. And make sure not only six feet, you bury 'em about sixteen feet because he might come up yet. So we could not fathom the idea of supporting one Republican guy. Well, anyway, this Red scare, that's how it took place. That it's easier to brand somebody--and they not going brand a rank and file; it's always the leader. And lot of the guys that were branded as

communist didn't know the difference between communism and rheumatism. (Laughs) So, that's how it happened.

Did I tell the story about--during 1949, '48 or '49, two FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agents came to my house? I was living down in the [New] Mill Camp over there, yeah, plantation.

WN: This was when you were the unit president?

RK: I was working for the--yeah, I was president of this whole island. They were already branding this guy, that guy, communist. I wasn't branded yet, you see.

So lot of my friends tell, "Eh, what's the matter with you? Look all the strong union man, all branded. Not you."

I said, "Don't blame me. I not buying them out, don't worry. I don't have money to buy them out for not to brand me."

But then, one morning, at the plantation home I was living, I was up, I said, "Gee, what a new car." Those days--this is '48 and '49--not anybody could get a new car. Production just started that year. But here I see two Haoles, suit, necktie. They knew where my house was, yeah. So I met them at the--all plantation house have porch. Okay. I said, "Good morning."

They said, "Good morning."

And they walked up the steps and they showed me . . .

WN: Their badge?

RK: Oh, yeah. No, not here. FBI, yeah. So I said, "Come inside." And so, came in the door and I sat here on the couch. That's one junk couch. The plantation, we can't afford furniture. And they were sitting on this two chair here, see, so. I said, "Well, I was waiting for you guys." No sooner I said that, boy, those two guys move their chairs to come where I was sitting. They thought I was going to squeal something, say something, you know. I said, "You know, all my friends were calling me phoney because you guys had already interrogated other union leaders and you guys didn't come to see me. Now that you have come to interrogate me, I can go and tell the whole island, the whole territory, that the FBI came to investigate me. And I want to thank you two for giving me that status. In our union, if the FBI don't come and interrogate you, then you must be a phoney. Now, you gave me the stamp of prestige." I told them that. Boy, they stood up and they walked out of my house.

WN: They didn't even ask you questions?

RK: No. They didn't even ask me questions. Well, that's the only way to shut them up, right? I told this story to Jack Hall and the top

officials of the [ILWU], oh, and they laugh, too. You know, the part when I said that I was waiting for you guys. Ho, the both of them, boy, move their chairs. They almost ran over me. (Laughs) So that was my first encounter with the FBI. But, let me tell you, Warren, that you don't feel good when they come and check you up. You still little intimidated, right? You know that word FBI those days--well, today I can tell the FBI you can kiss my rear end and I'm not afraid. But you know those days, yeah, lot of guys get intimidated.

But, tell you something. I was interpreting the contract demands to a group of Japanese in the Kukui'ula Camp, Japanese citizens. I was asked to be the interpreter for the Japanese group 'cause in 1950s, late '40s and early '50s, there was still a big group of issei workers on the plantation. And I had to interpret all these contract demands and negotiation results to this group. And as I was explaining the issues, the problems, there was one red-baiting issei in that group.

So he said, in other words, "What about the communist problem?"

So, I told this old man in the best Japanese that I could muster, that the problem, that's not our problem. That's the problem of the employers. And they want us to be all excited, worried about communism, communists, that everybody, before we go work, we going look under our bed. When we come back from work we got to open the woodshed and look. Find where the communist is so that we forget about the other big problems that we have on the plantation. Like wages, working conditions, the way they treating us, see. So, the majority, the overwhelming majority of the people, members, present in there, Japanese folks, they praise me. They said, what I'm saying is right. Yeah, forget that. We never come here to discuss communists, you see. So that scare, that boogeyman, communist boogeyman, held the union back plenty. Because, here, instead of we go out and talk about the issues, we had to go and explain about something that was not there, right? Well, I guess that was one of the reasons. To divert our energy to that, you see. And luckily, it didn't take hold or that we had a movement against the union leaders because they were branded as communist and all that, right? Because take Jack Hall. He was indicted, but they found that the Smith Act was unconstitutional. It took effect, yeah. It took effect. No, no doubt about that.

WN: Other than when the two FBI men came, were you at any time asked to declare, you know, [whether or not] you were member of the Communist party at anytime, or something like that?

RK: No, because I didn't--you see, I wasn't elected to public office or anything like that. Well, I was appointed to boards and commissions, yeah. And, I guess, I had to sign a pledge or oath or something, that I was not a member of any organization that was out to overthrow the government by force or in violence. Well, I don't know. But it didn't affect our membership that much.

WN: During the time you were president of Kaua'i Local, they had the longshoremen strike. [Nineteen] forty-nine strike.

RK: Right. Right, right.

WN: How were you involved in that?

RK: Well, we had to go and help the longshoremen, picketing and fund-raising and collection of food to sustain the stevedores over here. But the thing is this that we had maybe 5[,000]-6,000 sugar workers here. To support 2[00]-300 stevedores, there was no problem. But see, when the sugar workers go on strike, the problem was that we were the biggest. So the rest is so small that pretty hard to support us.

WN: You were the biggest on the island?

RK: Oh, yeah. In the territory at that time, sugar workers used to comprise about 25,000 alone. Yeah. Today, it's way down to about 8[,000]. But, at that time was still 25,000 sugar workers with about twenty-eight or thirty plantations. Today, way down, yeah. Yeah, we had helped the stevedores. Although, that was another kind of a strike where nothing can go through because the West Coast was so well organized. The ship don't come.

WN: That was a long strike, huh, six months, I think, huh?

RK: Right. Six months [177 days].

WN: So, Port Allen, Nāwiliwili . . .

RK: Ahukini.

WN: Ahukini.

RK: Yeah. That's all, yeah. Port Allen, Ahukini, yeah. That's the '49 strike. That's the year I took a trip to the Mainland to attend the [ILWU] convention. My first trip to the Mainland took thirteen hours and . . .

WN: Where, San Francisco?

RK: Yeah, San Francisco. That's a Stratocruiser. The two-deck propeller plane.

WN: Oh, thirteen hours on the plane?

RK: Thirteen hours, uh huh. Thirteen hours. We ate about three times. Got up (laughs). I was getting tired. But it was a experience for me because the first time I've been overseas. San Francisco, uh huh.

And can you beat that, when the manager [William P. Alexander] of my

plantation--only I wasn't working for the plantation yet; I was still on leave of absence working for the union--one day, told me, "Bob, I'm glad you're going to the Mainland, but don't let them change you."

So, I knew what he meant, right? Yeah, I knew what he meant.

WN: Oh, what did he mean?

RK: Well, that don't let them change you to be one communist or don't let them change you to be one radical. What the hell, I was a born a radical. I don't let nobody change me. In fact, if you wanted to compare me with lot of these guys on the Mainland, I was more radical than them, yeah. But the thing is this, that Mr. Alexander advised me, "Don't let them change you." So I was thinking, what the hell you talking about. Maybe he didn't want me to come more smart, I guess. (Laughs)

WN: So how long did you stay over there?

RK: Oh, about a week. Yeah, about a week. I didn't learn anything, what the hell, that I already knew.

WN: That was going to be my next question. (Laughs)

RK: No, (chuckles) I didn't learn anything. Only thing that I know, I learn where Fisherman's Wharf was. Where Alcatraz Island was, yeah. About cable cars, okay.

WN: (Laughs) So you were like, you played tourist then?

RK: Yeah. So I tell the boys, I said, "Eh, there's more to learn about where you are than the hell about the union conventions. And they passing the same resolution every two years," what the hell. But still then, you see, that was the period when the unions were getting the barrage from the right wing. The McCarthy period. That was a big fight over there. Okay, that's when they passed the Taft-Hartley Act. Right? The Taft-Hartley Act cut the gut out of the Wagner Act. See, the Taft-Hartley Act gave the company the right to go and speak up against unions. Can you beat that? With all the power that the industry has, yeah, Taft-Hartley Act weakened the Wagner Act. But that's when America was drifting more to the right.

WN: Whose administration was it? This is when?

RK: The Taft-Hartley Act was, I guess, [Harry] Truman [1947]. Was that Truman? Yeah. I think Truman. [Truman vetoed the measure, but Congress overrode the veto.] Then after Truman was . . .

WN: [Dwight] Eisenhower.

RK: Eisenhower. Yeah. Two terms--eight years of Eisenhower. Of

course, the pendulum was turning to the right. American politics.

WN: So you were president of Kaua'i Local from '47 to . . .

RK: About '50, 1950, yeah.

WN: Then you became business agent?

RK: That's right, yeah.

WN: Until '52?

RK: Yeah. Uh huh. Fifty-two, yeah. I went back work, yeah.

WN: How come you left the union?

RK: Well, I felt that my work was done already and I wasn't getting rich working for the union because, cost money work for the union. Just like politics, yeah, so. I was occupied long hours 'cause most of the union work comes after working hours. I wasn't spending too much time with my children, so I said, "Ah, I get enough already."

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 15-69-4-87
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
with

Robert Kunimura (RK)

December 15, 1987

Kōloa, Kaua'i

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Kunimura on a rainy day in Kōloa, Kaua'i, on December 15, 1987. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Bob, 1952, you went back to the plantation. What was your job on the plantation?

RK: Mill mechanic. They used to call that general mechanic. That's different than ICE mechanic. You know, the internal combustion engine mechanic, garage and diesel, gasoline. The mill mechanics work around pumps and whatever equipment they have in the milling department of the plantation.

WN: Who was your boss?

RK: (Pause) Oh, yeah, this guy. The head man was Brandt.

WN: Oh, Herman [K.] Brandt, [Jr.]?

RK: Yeah. That's right. He was the head.

WN: And you worked---you stayed there for how long doing that job?

RK: Oh, right through till I retired in '74.

WN: So up to the '58 strike you were still working in the mill?

RK: Oh, yeah, yeah, uh huh.

WN: So how did that '58 strike come about?

RK: Well, they forced us to strike. They made such a ridiculous kind of a offer that we--the union had no other course than to take a strike. Because, see, if we had accepted their last offer, it would have been demoralizing to the union. Something like four cents an hour increase. [The ILWU initially asked for twenty-five cents.] In other words, after the '46 strike, this is twelve years later,

the industry felt that it was time that they should try us out. And, I'm sure our leaders felt that this was a showdown battle. So that's why we were pretty well-prepared to take them on twelve years after the initial strike in the sugar industry.

WN: So all the contracts that were signed between '46 and '58 were for how many years?

RK: Well, it could have been that some of the contracts in the interim between the '46 and the '58 strike where there were wage openings and. . . . Not the whole entire agreement, okay. But when it comes to the life of a union, the union cannot be status quo. We have to make a lot of changes, improvement in our agreement. Otherwise, the members would not stand for any period of time without any substantial gain. Our wages were not that good at that time, too, '58 yet. And I guess the industry felt that they could beat us too.

WN: Why was '58--why did it happen in '58?

RK: Nineteen fifty-eight now?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Well, I guess it was because--as I said, about eleven years after the '46 strike. I guess the company had a lot of reserves, too. They have money to fight and they could sustain some losses and try beat us. In the long run, if they beat the union, they break the union, would be cheaper for them too.

WN: Was sugar doing well at that time?

RK: The sugar industry?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah, they were doing all right because they were paying low wages, yeah, low wages. And I guess the price of sugar was not bad at that time. But they didn't realize that that strike was going to last that long, you know. See, from February 1st . . .

WN: To June, I think, huh?

RK: June 9 or something like that. [The 1958 strike ended on June 6, 1958. It lasted 126 days.] And they [i.e., the sugar industry] lost. They lost a tremendous amount of money. See, the sugar, basically, unlike the manufacturing industry like automobile or appliance industry, if the factory is shut down, no manufactured goods will go out from the factory. Sugar is different. You see, in 1958, when we struck the industry, no sugar was manufactured. And that was the peak months, see. That's what we learned--we found out ourselves that we didn't have to have the contract expire during the summer months. As long as we timed the strike, we could work and then call the strike later on. But February was the [contract]

expiration date at that time, instead of September 30, the expiration date was--in 1958--was January 31. So, it was closer to the peak months than back in '46 when the contract expired toward the end of the harvesting season.

WN: I see.

RK: So, we not only stopped the manufacture of sugar from the factory, the delay of the '58 crop--because sugarcane grows on a ratoon basis. What you [plant] this year is supposed to be the cane that you going to harvest two years from now. 'Cause it takes about twenty-two, twenty-four months. So, since there was a delay from February to June, the first week in June, all the cane that was still in the ground [went] unharvested in 1958. Two years later, that cane was delayed four months.

WN: Because it's not harvested and you couldn't plant?

RK: Not only plant but, what we call ratoon. From the old plant, as soon as you harvest, the new plant come up, see. The sugar industry learned and the union learned that when you strike that long, you not only damage this year's '58 crop, you damage the following year crop.

WN: I see. I see.

RK: And that wait four years. In other words, there would be a three-year effect.

WN: So it takes three years for the industry to recoup or to catch up again?

RK: Yeah.

WN: I see. What happens to cane if it's not harvested? I mean, is it no good or . . .

RK: On the Big Island plantations where they raise the cane more, unirrigated way, they learn some places that the longer they kept the cane they had more sugar, more yield. But you know, where like this island mostly irrigated fields, it was not so. Maybe after twenty-four months in this drought, instead of the yield go up, the yield drop because you did not harvest the cane when they were in the peak condition, the ripened condition.

WN: Things like weeds, too, huh, probably had something to do with it?

RK: Well, that depends, you see. When the cane is about ten months or older, there won't be too much weed problem because the cane has already grown up and they plowed out all weeds, grass can't grow in the cane. But, if you talk about month to month, three-month-old cane, oh, the weeds going overtake the cane.

WN: So you were saying on the Big Island, it's mostly unirrigated?

RK: Mostly unirrigated.

WN: And Kaua'i is mostly irrigated.

RK: Yeah. That's right.

WN: So, in other words, though, the longer that they didn't harvest the cane on the Big Island, it was beneficial to the company.

RK: Yeah. They learn that, oh, they get better yield. After that, I was told that a lot of places instead of twenty-four months on the Big Island, they raise to thirty months.

WN: So did that affect the strike on the Big Island at all?

RK: Same thing.

WN: Same thing?

RK: Yeah. Because the sugar, instead of normal, medium-tall crops, I'm sure they produced not quite 700,000 tons. In other words, they lost over 30 percent the first year. When they lost the subsequent year, '59, they lost and were real concerned. Production quotas dropped and, 1960, the third year, they knew . . .

WN: This is Big Island?

RK: No, no. This is . . .

WN: Kaua'i?

RK: Here, yeah.

WN: So Big Island lost the least? You think the Big Island lost the least?

RK: Yeah, I guess so. I guess so. Because unirrigated plantation, they had to depend on rain more so during the summer months. More so during the summer months.

WN: Oh, I see.

RK: Of course, [rainy] weather like this all right (chuckles). Those years, I don't know why, the years that we struck the plantation, somebody was helping us out because there were hardly any rain. I guess somebody was watching us more because, I think, we were more than the bosses, huh. Altogether we had more in number. I think had more prayers, at least. (Chuckles)

WN: So the contract ending in January 31, was that a negotiated thing?

RK: That's right. Yeah. Remember now, the first agreement that we had, the contract expiration was September 30 and we improved that to a later date.

WN: So how did you folks prepare for the '58 strike? First of all, how was the '58 strike different from '46?

RK: Well, we were more experienced to begin with. And financially we were more. . . . We had more finances saved up for the '58 strike.

WN: Through what, dues? Union dues?

RK: Yeah, union dues. Strike assessment. And we made sure that nobody starved.

WN: You had soup kitchens?

RK: Yeah, we had soup kitchens. And, yeah, 175 [128] days is a hell of a long strike, but everybody stuck together. Nobody went to work. Nobody broke ranks, right? Because the ranks were solid.

WN: But in '58, as opposed to '46, everybody had house payments to make and stuff?

RK: No. Still in 1958, very few of us, if any, were living in their own home. They were still renting from the plantation. I mean, they still were living on the plantation home, so they were paying rent. But during the course of the strike, we didn't pay no rent, yeah. We couldn't afford--we paid that after the strike.

WN: To the plantation?

RK: Yeah. Because our landlord was the plantation.

WN: Yeah. So the plantation didn't play hardball and kick you guys out?

RK: No. No, no. In fact, in the 1958 strike, most of the companies, let's say, they were not as vicious like in the '46 strike. They cooperated with the union, they helped us clear up--if we wanted to borrow machinery, we could borrow from them, yeah. And we cooperated with them, too. We make sure that nobody damage plantation property. We got along good in the '58 strike. Well, I guess they had more civilized guys running their plantations, I think.

WN: Who was the manager at that time?

RK: Oh, our manager was, '58, I guess was Alexander of Grove Farm. There was no Koloa Sugar already.

WN: Yeah.

RK: I think was Alexander, if I'm not mistaken. He was a good man,

yeah. We could get along with him. Or maybe it was Moragne, I don't know. [William M. Moragne Sr. managed Grove Farm Plantation from 1953 to 1969.]

WN: Moragne?

RK: Well, one of them.

WN: Mm hmm. I see. Did you folks picket?

RK: Only the first morning. More for informational picket line, yeah. Because nobody was going to cross the picket line, anyway. It was not necessary. But, just to establish to the public that we were on strike and that's all. Most of the fellows were assigned to gardening, and hunting, and fishing, and cooking.

WN: How did the soup kitchens work? I mean, who organized the soup kitchens and. . . .

RK: The union with the women's auxiliary.

WN: Oh.

RK: We made sure we involved the women, too, the housewives. . . .

WN: Well, what kind of things did they cook?

RK: Oh, well, we had--some days we had cream tuna, some day chop suey, some days beef stew. Oh, the reason is because we raised all the vegetables, and as far as meat, pork, chicken, we used to go out and buy. We go to a rancher up in Kalāheo, we say, "We take that two heads, yeah, how much." And our guys go and slaughter 'em and we had our own chill freezer. So, cheaper that way, yeah. If hog, the same thing. Send a guy over, go look for couple of heads of hogs and we did our own butchering and. . . .

WN: Where were the meals prepared?

RK: Oh, you see, luckily for us, right in this town here, Kōloa town, there was an old market that went out of business but there was still chiller, freezing room, kitchen because that was not only a market, that was a restaurant also.

WN: Oh. Which market was this?

RK: That's a food market. Yeah. Right down of the post office. You know under the monkeypod tree?

WN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah. There was a big market before, you see. So we got the electric company to hook back the electricity.

WN: Oh, yeah?

RK: Yeah. And, oh boy, we had a first-class soup kitchen over there. Very convenient, everything was there.

WN: Where were the meals served?

RK: Meals served? Oh, we had the big place there for serve the meal and take out if they want to take home. In fact, we encourage them to take home rather than they come over here because the soup kitchen couldn't handle if all the family came, they couldn't handle.

WN: Was there a social hall or anything like that?

RK: Yeah. We had the---yeah, we could use that place for social hall if we wanted. Because as long as it didn't rain. Nice big area over there, yeah.

WN: Where?

RK: That market.

WN: Oh, the market, oh. But wasn't there a plantation hall?

RK: No. At that time, the plantation hall was already--unlike the '46 strike, that hall that we used in '46 was already broken down, I think. That's where the [First Hawaiian] Bank is now. That's where our headquarters used to be. The '46 strike.

WN: So the '58 one, you didn't have that big hall, social hall?

RK: No, we didn't have it then.

WN: So where was the headquarters?

RK: Oh, our headquarters was right in town. We had one place rented here. Right across from the soup kitchen. That's what--thirty years ago, right, thirty years ago.

WN: Yeah.

RK: I guess that was the last shot of the plantation taking on the union. After that '58 strike, we had some short, quickie strikes. One-week or four-week kind strike, but there wasn't anymore long strike.

WN: The major issue in the '58 strike was wages?

RK: That's right, yeah, wages. And, if you look deeply, the right for the union to survive in Hawai'i. If we had accepted their offer, four cents an hour--you don't need a union for accept four cents an hour, right, they'll give it to you anyway. So, that was a battle, the survival of the union. They thought that they could beat us

here. That's why they took us on. That's why they fought so tenaciously, too. And they lost millions of dollars. I was told at that time, they lost over 300 million dollars. Only in loss, right? But remember now, not only this year, the following year and the third year. The ripple effect.

WN: Do you remember what the final settlement was?

RK: Yeah. The final settlement was, I think, we got fifteen [sixteen] cents an hour increase, first of all, and ten [seven] cents more the following year. So, in other words, we got a package of about twenty-five [twenty-three] cents an hour increase.

WN: Let's see, fifteen and ten [sixteen and seven]? Do you know what the union's original proposal was?

RK: No. I don't remember. [Twenty-five cents across-the-board wage increase.] Of course, we had lot of other improvements. More vacation and more holidays.

WN: Did the union win that strike, in your opinion?

RK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We chew 'em. In fact, we got more than what we were asking for.

WN: Was that mediated . . .

RK: No.

WN: . . . in arbitration?

RK: No, no. The stronger side don't want that, you see. In later years when we were stronger, they asked for arbitration and we told 'em, "You go to hell. Now you want arbitration. We strong enough, we don't need arbitration." Well, that's the way it goes, you see.

WN: I read where in the '58 strike Governor [William F.] Quinn was involved somewhat? Did he step in?

RK: Yes. Because---when did we have statehood?

WN: [Nineteen] fifty-nine.

RK: [Nineteen] fifty-nine. Yeah, Quinn was still the appointed governor [in 1958].

WN: Right.

RK: You see when this politician come. It's a known fact that the Republicans were for the big guys; the Democrats were for the smaller guys. We know that, right? I'm talking about in those days. So Quinn, naturally, the industry going to tell 'em, "Oh, we no need your help, lay off," okay. And he's not going intervene until he get the word. So when we had the sugar industry down,

Quinn jump in and he said, "Oh, it's about time we settled." But he taking the orders or he got the message from the industry.

So that's the disadvantage when you get the politicians--and more so like the governor, at that time was still appointed governor--on their side. 'Cause I can cite you that later on we had--I think this was about mid-'60s, we had couple of short strikes, but at that time we had a Democrat governor, [John A.] Burns. And our spokesman Jack Hall sent word to Burns, "Stay out. We can handle ourselves."

But the other way, when you have a not-too-friendly governor, he's going to work with the industry, like Quinn. And when the governor, the headman of this state [territory], jumps in and says, "Well, it's about time you guys settle." How can you go against the governor without losing public support? But just the opposite when we had our kind of a governor. We tell him stay out of this, we can handle, right. But the ordinary guy can't understand that, you see. So. . . .

WN: What was the relationship between Jack Hall and John Burns?

RK: Oh. Very good, very good. Remember now, Jack Burns lost to Joe [Joseph R.] Farrington for delegate to Congress [in 1954]. See, [prior to statehood], the highest elected official in the territory was delegate to Congress. No voting power but just representing the

WN: Territory.

RK: . . . territory to the United States government. And the highest was the governor appointed by the president. Of course, if you got the Republican president, no doubt you got a Republican governor. And in the old days even with a Democratic president, the governor was more with the Big Five than with--because there was no such thing as Democratic party like we know today. So we supported Jack Burns, delegate to Congress. He lost to Joe Farrington, and Joe Farrington died in office so Betty [Elizabeth], his wife, succeeded him. [Actually, Elizabeth Farrington succeeded her husband via a special election following Joseph Farrington's death in June 1954. Mrs. Farrington then defeated Burns in the regular election for delegate to Congress in November 1954.] And I think the second election [in 1956], two-year term, Jack Burns beat her. Then when we became state [in 1959], Jack Burns ran for governor. The first gubernatorial race. Quinn, who was more or less the incumbent--he was the last appointed governor--he ran as a Republican. And Jack Burns lost. Well, the reason was because of the Republicans used the Second Mahele. Governor Quinn promised that if he get elected, he was going sell everybody twenty-five dollar one acre or something, land. (Chuckles) And lot of people in Hawai'i got fooled. So, Burns was defeated--pretty close margin, but Quinn became the first elected governor of Hawai'i.

WN: [Nineteen] fifty-nine, yeah? Fifty-nine. After statehood, yeah?

RK: Yeah. Well, anyway, he stayed there one term, Quinn. After that, Jack Burns was elected about three terms, I think, or something. [Burns defeated Quinn for the governorship in 1962, and served three terms as governor until his death in 1974.] So our union and Jack Hall [RK meant to say Burns] had a very good relation. In fact, when Jack Burns was running for delegate to Congress, he didn't have plane fare to come to Kaua'i to campaign. So we did all the campaigning for him over here.

WN: And getting back to that '58 strike, if you compare '46 to '58, what would you consider to be the more significant strike? [Nineteen] forty-six or '58?

RK: Oh . . .

WN: What was more important?

RK: I would say the '46 strike because, here, first time in the history of the territory of Hawai'i, the whole industry went out. There was no ethnic or racial union here. All integrated union and we went out and, first time, we went out and we beat the industry. So I think that was a more significant strike. [Nineteen] fifty-eight is a strike that we had more experienced leaders.

WN: Plus, the industry was weaker?

RK: No, I don't think so.

WN: No.

RK: I think the industry was strong yet.

WN: Oh, yeah.

RK: The industry was strong yet then. They were going full blast with mechanization, there were less workers on the plantation. So the plantation was strong.

WN: So you would say '58 was the last big strike?

RK: Yeah. The last big one.

WN: I read where they called it the, '58, the "Aloha Strike."

RK: No, I've never heard of that.

WN: You never heard that term?

RK: I never did hear of that. Because after the '58 strike, we had short ones in '61--because we had a three-year agreement--'61 and then '62 or '64, yeah, we had some one-month strike or something like that, yeah. We had some. But not--no more the showdown kind of a . . .

WN: Mm hmm, mm hmm. I think--they said "aloha strike" meaning that things were kind of amicable, you know, that there wasn't that much confrontation as there was in '46. It was more friendly, like you were saying . . .

RK: Well, which is true. Yeah, which is true. As I told you, that in '46 on certain plantations, yeah, it was really a cat-and-dog affair. And on other plantations, good relations. So, I guess they evaluated that. So in '58, when all good relation all over--I guess the plantation found out that it was better to have good relations even during the strike. So after all, they human beings, they learn, too, right?

WN: Okay. Were you involved in politics at all at that time or afterwards?

RK: As soon as we formed this union, we were told time and time again that union--two arm in the union. The left arm was the political arm and the right arm was the union, see, and that these two had to go together. Because it's not just to win 'em on the economic front and lose 'em on the political front. What they meant was that, okay, you get better raises, but then the workingman had to pay more taxes. What's the sense, right? Something like that.

So, since the union started--and it was a coincidence that the year that we struck, '46, that's the year that we had an election on this island. Because, usually, two years, every two years is election. And that the Democrats were getting stronger and stronger, were coming out. And they came out and they sided with us and they solicited our support. So, even on this island, I'm sure we swept the entire island, as far as the candidates concerned. The Democrats practically won this island. And we struck from September 1 because the agreement--August 31 was the expiration of the agreement, so union went on strike September 1, okay, and that's the peak of the election. Yeah, so we took the candidates, Democrats, all over the camp--in fact, that's how they started the house-to-house campaigning. So we were involved. From the very inception of the union, we knew we had to play politics. And we had to organize along that line, politically, too.

WN: I guess the example of Jack Burns as governor is a good example, too, of, you know, getting the political support, yeah?

RK: Right. Right, right.

WN: Yeah. To what extent were union members running and winning seats in office?

RK: Well, I guess, on this island we had one representative; later on, he became a senator. Arashiro, [Matsuki] "Mutt" Arashiro. He was a union man. But other than that, no. They ran for office but they couldn't get in. They couldn't get in.

WN: How come?

RK: Well, maybe the wrong person running.

WN: Oh.

RK: Maybe the wrong person. And maybe the one that would have been elected, they didn't care to run for office. Could be that, right? But on other islands, Maui, who's the senator there, [Mamoru] Yamasaki. He's still [in office]. We had Hawai'i.

WN: [Yoshito] Takamine?

RK: Takamine. [Goro] Hokama, Lāna'i.

WN: On Lāna'i.

RK: Of course, O'ahu would be more difficult. Of course, after the reapportionment, became easier, but there was a time when you run the whole islandwide campaign. The union guys get it pretty hard, right, in O'ahu. Because the outside public outnumber the union guys, see.

WN: What about the past mayors of Kaua'i--well, I guess they were called [county] chairman at the time--did they intervene at all in the strikes at any time? Did they have any kind of power?

RK: No. Other than in the '58 strike, the island of Kaua'i, the union on Kaua'i, asked for, lobbied for, and won free buses for high school students. I can say that we initiated that on this island and when we won, we got that from the board of supervisors [now Kaua'i County Council] on this island. We had public hearing, we testified, and because of our political strength, the supervisors adopted the free bus.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: So you folks actually were the first to start the bus system on Kaua'i?

RK: Yeah. Uh huh.

WN: So, what is your personal involvement in politics? Were you ever asked to run? Did you ever consider running?

RK: No. Because I didn't care [to do so] and also the fact that way back in 1950, early 1950, my kid brother [Tony Kunitura] was already in politics. And I felt that one in the family was one too many in politics. That's why I didn't care too much for politics. But I

got two appointments to be [on the] Kaua'i Traffic Commission [and] I was member of the Kaua'i Planning Commission. And I supported lot of Democrats on the campaign committee, senator, mayor. We lost some, but we won some, too, where I was involved.

WN: How has political campaigning changed over the years?

RK: You mean the . . .

WN: Like is getting somebody elected today different from getting somebody elected twenty years ago, thirty years ago?

RK: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. In the past, most of the positions were islandwide. Now, because of reapportionment, like the house of representatives is different. Council [is] islandwide. Mayor is islandwide, so. No, not much different, the tactics, the strategy, the tactics would be about the same. It's the grassroots type of a movement. No politician or no organization can make decision in one room and that the candidate going to be elected because the decision was made in that room. It got to go down to the voters and more man-to-man contact. More disciples out in the field, backing up and talking for certain candidates. That's a successful campaign.

WN: Well, today, you have a lot of TV and you have radio and you have sign waving, is that different?

RK: Yeah, but, wait now. And TV, that would be very effective but that is one of the most expensive way of campaigning. And if you didn't have the TV on that very moment when your picture came out, your message came out, it's gone right? Now, newspaper or flyers, even if they didn't give it to you, you see 'em on side of the road, pick up one, you can see that. So, TV is, as far as local candidates, that's out of the question, cost too much. Yeah, that cost too much. But, well, roadside campaigning, and the effective one is, you can get in every community, every camp, every lane, somebody that goes up and speak for you, talk for you. This man-to-man selling of him. Yeah, that would be better. And, now and then, you can hold one beer bust, call the guys in, and give 'em some potato chips and smoked meat, some beer. Yeah, be effective, that.

WN: So, political campaigning and union organizing, was that similar styles?

RK: Well. . . . In a way it's about the same, but remember now, talk about union organizing, of course, there's no problem today to organize within the company because they have union shop and they have--no closed shop--but they have agency shop where the workers within a specified time, they required to join the union. Well, most of the big industries, they had that clause in their agreement. So the union don't have to go and organize the unorganized within that company. Most are organized already, right? But if you are talking about organizing the unorganized, all right, let's say, a

new hotel come up in Po'ipū. Let's say, 300 workers there. In order for you to win the election, the election of that outfit--to begin with, you have to get at least 25 percent--oh, I don't know what the required amount of the workers in that hotel to sign a petition requesting union representation or something like that. That, you have to go out and sign up the guys and then they going have a secret vote.

Now, naturally, no boss going to welcome union. Understood, they hate unions. And so, if the company going to make a party, the boss going to say, "Good morning, Joe," or "Good morning Harry," during that period when the campaign is going on, see. So, I would say, union organizing is much harder and little different. And like politics, sure, you got to be truthful, and above all you got to be up and up with the guys. Not only election year, for three months you going be nice to Warren or be nice to Henry. That kind of a thing don't go. You got to be up and up with these guys, election or non-election years.

WN: Yeah, right.

RK: And I'm sure if they need help, you got to help 'em, that's right. So--I don't know. Two different, yeah, two different things. Union organizing is not easy, yeah. It's hard to even convince your own wife sometimes. Yeah? (WN chuckles.) No, in the old days when the wages were so low, working conditions was so bad, that was easy. The workers are no longer exploited today because of the union movement in Hawai'i, everybody benefits. Union or no union. Private or government, that's right. Because if the private industry, the pay was low, the government industry pay is low, too. That's automatic, see. And so today, even the government workers are making good pay, but there was a time when they were way down in the economic ladder. The government workers, county workers, oh, but today they way up.

WN: You said that you were on the Kaua'i Planning Commission and, you know, Kaua'i is--of all the islands in terms of growth, tourism, and so forth--it seems to be going, you know, slower than maybe Maui and O'ahu. And for example, there's a four-story height limit on buildings. Were you involved in that at all?

RK: Oh, yes. Very much so. Well, to begin with, see, my brother who was on the board of supervisors on this island, they adopted the resolution that restricted no higher than the coconut trees which would be about four-story high. So, later on, it was adopted into the comprehensive zoning ordinance that no higher than four stories.

WN: This is for any building?

RK: Yeah. Well, not only hotels but office buildings. Oh, yeah, we fought like hell for that.

WN: What were some of the reasons for that?

RK: Well, we felt that if they go fifty stories on O'ahu, and they go thirty stories on Maui, well, we can be different. And different in a better way to keep this island low. And today, the developers are happy about that. Because they get so much commendation from the tourists that come here. "Oh, you got a beautiful island. There's no high-rise." Got four stories. Sure, people for high-rise say, "Even if we put one chicken coop on the beach, you can't see the ocean," yeah.

Well, we are not talking about that. What we are talking about is twenty, thirty, forty stories by the beach shoreline like Waikīkī. And today, in Honolulu, you can't see the mountain, let alone the ocean, right? From Kapi'olani district, you want to see Tantalus? You get hard time see Tantalus. That's what we talking about, that four story should be the limit. And there's plenty room to go sideways. But the developer rather go high because he get more density to his area.

WN: Was there a lot of opposition to that four-story high?

RK: Yes. The greedy ones, yeah. The developers, the contractors. But the contractors, they don't know what they doing or what they saying because if they go low, there's more job for the carpenters, the trades group. If you're going to build one eight-story structure, you'll get one roof line, right? Now, you have to build two four-stories. Same amount of room like this one but get more job on this two forty-foot units, right? You have to get two roofs. You have to get two support. But one eight-story or one sixteen-story, sure, that's what the developer want. They want to put more room per area, that's all. And yet we have construction workers, misguided, they don't know what they talking, testifying for high-rise. They stupid, yeah?

WN: How did the [former] Kaua'i Surf [Hotel, now Westin Kaua'i] get through?

RK: Well, you see, if they want to go more than four stories, they can get it through variance, you see. But they have to justify why they going build 'em. And like Kaua'i Surf, that was before the comprehensive zoning ordinance. They gave 'em a variance, but it's in a cove. It's not going to be a eyesore or anything. And for that matter, if they were to build one hotel down--you know where Lāwa'i Kai is?

WN: Yeah.

RK: You can go ten story, even twenty story, you cannot see. So down the cove, right?

WN: So what is your attitude toward hotel development in this area. For example, Mahā'ulepū, I think they're going to build one over there [i.e., Developer Mel Ventura's \$135 million Hyatt Regency Kaua'i]?

RK: I think that if Kōloa area is overbuilt, to begin with, yeah, we getting traffic problems here, already. The beaches are getting too crowded. Why should they make more hotels here? At least, leave one area open for the people. Because the landowner don't own the beach. They may own the adjacent property but they don't own the beach. And once you build a hotel, mama-san and papa-san, local people won't go there already, right? And more so, the landowner only gets one beach zoning. And he going to sell that to a developer, and usually who's the wealthy developer? They come from Japan. I not against the Japanese coming in here and buying things up, huh, that's okay, that's their money. But don't come here and try to buy out the Mahā'ulepū Beach. And people get the right to okay that or disapprove that.

WN: So what's the status of that project right now?

RK: I'm sure what the [land]owner, the Grove Farm Company, is trying to do is--they are on a fishing expedition. They're fishing around. But I tell most of the people out here, "You want to see a hotel above the ocean?" No way. So I try and tell them, "All right, be prepared." The owners not going let valuable property like that stay idle. And more so, that's a resting ground for Hawaiians over there. Oh, burial ground. I'm sure, the Hawaiians, lacking pick and shovel, didn't go and bury people in the proper ground, right? They found the easiest place, right? Where the sand dunes, yeah. Easier to dig or cover. Oh, the skeletons over there.

WN: Oh, yeah.

RK: That's the worse thing, to disturb the resting ground, right?

WN: What is your attitude toward sugar phasing out? Is sugar going to phase out over here, eventually?

RK: Well, regardless of my attitude, if they not going to make money, yeah, they not going stay in business. Take Kīlauea [Sugar Company, which folded in 1971], now, they weren't making money there. And I bring up the example of Kīlauea because that's the only sugar plantation [on Kaua'i] that went out of business. And they made more money in selling that land . . .

WN: Mm hmm. You anticipate the same thing with Grove Farm or McBryde?

RK: Well, I wouldn't know. Remember now, McBryde is with a very prosperous agency. A&B [Alexander and Baldwin]. So even if McBryde loses money, that's nothing to the corporative entity. But they not going lose and lose and lose, right? Nobody stay in business just to lose money. You can't afford to stay in business to lose money. So, I feel sorry for the young fellows, huh, that working for the company like that.

WN: Do you see any alternatives for this area other than sugar?

RK: No. I can't think of any alternative.

WN: People were saying coffee--they're thinking of growing coffee in this area?

RK: Yeah. McBryde is experimenting with coffee, but do you think that we can compete with Brazil and Colombia and [other] South American countries? Well, if the coffee price go too low, then they use 'em to fuel their--boil 'em, the coffee beans.

WN: Well, Kona solved their problem by making a gourmet . . .

RK: Hmm?

WN: . . . you know, Kona was in that situation, too, before they started marketing it as a gourmet kind of coffee, huh?

RK: Yeah.

WN: Kona coffee.

RK: Right, right, right.

WN: That sort of lifted up the industry, yeah?

RK: Yeah. But you talking about a backyard industry. Kona, right, I been there, I seen that operation, yeah. But all this thousands of acres of cane land. Macadamia nut? You going get macadamia nuts come out of the ears of the customers in the Mainland, you convert all this cane land to macadamia nut. And maybe the price of macadamia nut is high because the supply is low. But once the supply start going up--unless demand can catch up. But the poor countries cannot afford to buy macadamia nut. I don't think you can market the macadamia nuts in Mexico. Unless you turn the Hawaiian Islands into casino, gambling.

WN: What's in store for the future of Kōloa say in, you know, thirty, forty years?

RK: Thirty, forty years from now, my goodness, yeah, Warren, that's--we going into 2020, right?

WN: Yeah.

RK: I hate to project that ahead because, see, when I was on the planning commission, this consultant, oh, they plan in 1990 we going to have 80,000 population of Kaua'i, the projection based on so many percentage. And this is almost 1990, I didn't even see what they projected come out true.

WN: Okay, well, I going turn off the tape recorder. This is the fourth session (chuckles) we had, any last things you want to say?

RK: No. If you get one more, all right, you can go.

WN: Okay, thanks Bob.

END OF INTERVIEW

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